

Caged:

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

Caged

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First Edition

Caged

Rorie ko Ben

*This story takes place during
Chapters One to Eighteen of Dagger and Coin.*

CALLA WAS CRYING again.

Rorie couldn't stand it. He longed for a bow and arrow, or a slingshot with a good round rock, or even the knife their latest captors had taken from him. The foul men might have missed it, if he hadn't jumped on the one who'd leered at Calla; the three who had pulled him off had beaten him and searched him thoroughly before tossing him into the cell. At least they'd been so busy punching him that they'd left Calla and the others alone.

He might have been proud of himself, despite his swollen eye, busted lip, and aching side, if he had meant it as a distraction. But as usual, he'd just been acting on pure adrenaline and anger. He and his fellow Melarim had been so stupid to trust that these Qilarites would really send them home, to believe the things Jonis ko Rikar had promised.

Rorie crawled over to where Calla sobbed gently in the corner, and stroked her hair. "Don't cry," he whispered, but the words came out raw instead of comforting.

She sniffed. "I thought you were asleep." The others in the cell around them were, curled up on the stone floor with the walls at their backs, children cuddled up to their parents, and, in some cases, whatever adult had taken on that role since they had been torn away from their island homes by Qilarite raiders. During the day, Calla could usually be found with three or four of the youngest ones pressed close to her like kittens to a mama cat, but now she had removed herself to the far corner. It wasn't the first time Rorie had found her that way; she never cried in front of the children when she could help it.

"Can't sleep," he muttered, and winced as he eased himself against the wall next to her. He put his arm around her, and guilt tugged at his heart at how easily she rested her head on his shoulder. It should have been his older brother Bradik here with her—or rather, it should have been Calla and Bradik back home on Longa, preparing for their wedding. It would have taken place in just a few Shinings, at Qorana Qia, the beginning of the rainy season. Most of the island would have gathered in the sarya, the open place at the center of their village, to watch Calla and

Bradik write the symbols of marriage on one another's forearms with the sacred ink that wouldn't wear off for a year or more.

Rorie realized that he was tracing symbols on the back of Calla's wrist: protect, the same that his mother used to trace on her children's foreheads before parting. Mother had even taken the time to do it when he had come pelting into the cottage with the news of raider ships on the horizon, before she and his younger sisters had fled for the mountain caves.

Well. Rorie's finger wasn't a quill, and it left no yearlong ink on Calla's skin. Once they got out of here—if they got out of here—she'd probably hate him for the way he'd stepped into his brother's role. Goddess, he rather hated himself for it. After all, he didn't even know if Kira was still alive.

But Calla was here now, and he thought maybe she needed this comfort as much as he did. She tilted her face up to his, and didn't move away when he kissed her. The heat of her lips would only sate the dark thing inside him for a little while; the shame would come afterwards, but right now, he didn't care.

Rorie and Kira had been out in the bay checking the fishing nets the morning the raider ship came. He'd been teasing her about the attentions that Kale ko Foy had been paying her, listing all the K names they could give their babies, speculating about whether those babies would have Kale's turned-up nose or her freckles. Kira had grown steadily redder, and had finally launched a crab at his head. Later he would realize that he had been testing her; though she was only a year younger than he was and had been his best friend ever since he could walk, he hadn't been sure how to feel about the fact that most of the village assumed they would marry eventually. He was only fifteen—how was he supposed to know who he wanted to marry? Still, he hadn't liked the pull in his gut when he'd heard his twelve-year-old sister Jillanne talking about Kale walking Kira home from lessons or picking flowers for her.

"If it bothers you so much," Kira snapped, "you could always—"

"What? What could I do?" he challenged, his heart thumping.

But the color drained from Kira's face, and she pointed behind him. Rorie turned, and saw it too: a huge ship, black, except for the red flag. "Maybe—maybe it's just a trader," he said.

But they both grabbed the oars and paddled for shore with all their might, not wasting time on words. Traders came to the island periodically, but the People of Sotia didn't take chances. If anything larger than a rowboat appeared on the horizon, the mothers and children went to the caves, and anyone with the strength to fight prepared to do so. Raiders hadn't come to Longa in twenty years, and Rorie had stood with the others in the sarya not long ago and listened while Calantha ke Bri of the Learned Ones, with her stocky, silent apprentice Loris ko Puli at her side, announced that Sotia had triumphed over the other gods and that her people had nothing more to fear.

Maybe Calantha was right. Maybe the ship was just an Emtirian trader, come to exchange sugar and tea and salt for the tender mushrooms the Longans harvested from the mountain forests. But Rorie knew from the tense set of Kira's shoulders as she rowed with him, their heaving breath in perfect unison, that fear was coursing through her blood too.

Kira leaped out of the boat as soon as they hit the shallows, and dragged it forward so he could climb out. He shielded his eyes and looked back at the ship. It had anchored out in the bay and two longboats full of men were on their way toward them. The steel at their belts glinted in the sun.

"Not traders," said Kira grimly. "Go warn the village. I'll find Calantha."

"No, I'll go to—"

"Don't be stupid. I'm faster, and it's a longer run," snapped Kira. "Just go."

He squeezed her hand, wishing he hadn't teased her about Kale, and they'd both turned to run when Kira cried out and fell to her knees.

An arrow protruded from her right shoulder. The men in the boats were in bow range.

Definitely not traders.

"Kira!" Rorie cried, dropping to his knees next to her.

Kira braced herself on her hands and knees and looked over her shoulder at the arrow. Her face was chalk white. "Break off the shaft," she gasped. "I can't run with this."

"But I—"

"Do it, Rorie!" she growled. "They're coming. We have to warn everyone."

There was no blood on Kira's tunic, just a hole where the arrow had gone in and buried itself in the meat of her shoulder. Rorie thought he was going to be sick, but he braced his hand

on her upper arm and cracked the thin shaft of the arrow. Kira spat blood onto the sand, and Rorie's stomach turned.

He pulled her to her feet, and she squeezed his hand. "Run," she whispered as two more arrows landed in the sand around them.

And then she was off, down the path, leaping over fallen branches like an eland. Rorie took one horrified glance at the longboats inching closer to shore and followed, the bobbing of her blue tunic ahead of him a guiding star until she turned off toward the Learned One's cottage and he had to go on alone.

A prayer to Sotia pounded through his lungs as he ran. He still felt himself hoping that it was all, somehow, a misunderstanding, that he and Kira would be able to go finish checking the nets later, that he'd gather around the dinner table with his family and hear his mother and Calla excitedly discussing wedding plans, or hear his father chide him for eating his food too quickly.

That, of course, had been nothing but a false hope. Kira had understood everything long before he had. No one had been able to tell him what happened to her after she had arrived at Calantha's cottage, but he thought he knew. Kira wouldn't have run off to the mountains, even injured. She would have made her stand beside Calantha, would have fought to the death before she let the slavers take her.

Rorie thought he might have preferred that. He'd fought beside his father and the other village men, determined to give the woman and children time to escape, and had watched his father take an axe to the chest. The hot fury that had bubbled in him had made him jab his knife at the big man who'd done it, and the man had put him in a chokehold, almost lazily. Rorie had passed out, and woken in a cage on the slaver ship with his arms and legs bound. He'd been robbed of everything, he thought, including the right to die fighting.

But he'd been wrong, because the raiders had managed to take even more from him.

He shouldn't have been relieved at the sight of his brother Bradik peering out through the bars of the cage across from him, Calla at his side. He didn't want them to be on this ship, bound for the places of the lost. He wanted them to be safe in the mountain caves with his mother and sisters, preparing to grieve for their dead and lost and to defiantly celebrate their wedding as the People of Sotia always did, never allowing life's constant sorrows to drown its joys. Bradik had a plan—he always had a plan—and he was building one of his inventions, with the broken handle

of the waste-bucket and a hairpin from Calla's twist, something that would stretch out from the bars and allow him to pick the lock of the cage.

Despite the walls painted with prayers to the goddess written in their own blood, the others around them grew more listless with every day that went by with not enough food, not enough water, not enough sunlight filtering in through the dim portholes. After he'd cut his bonds with the jagged piece of metal Bradik tossed across the aisle to him, Rorie spent hours pacing the length of the cage, sidestepping the lumps formed by the unmoving bodies of the other islanders. He kept the sharp metal in his pocket like a charm, and imagined using it on the cruel-faced men who came once a day to empty their waste buckets and bring them fresh water—though never enough—and toss crusts of bread through the bars like the islanders were asotis begging for scraps. Some of the others leapt for the food, making the sailors laugh, but Rorie refused. This meant he usually only got whatever mangled crumbs were left, but he didn't care.

Late at night when the ship was quiet, Rorie would press close to the bars and he and his brother would trade whispers about their plan: once Bradik had picked the lock, he would free Rorie and the two of them would go looking for weapons. They'd return and free the others; with the boys and men alone, they would be enough to overpower the crew. And then they would return home. The People of Sotia knew ships; this one might be larger than what they were used to, but they would be able to navigate their way north.

They never discussed the fact that in hundreds of years, none of the Melarim—the lost—had ever returned to the islands. That the two of them couldn't have been the first to try.

Calla was always right beside Bradik at the bars when they'd had these discussions, clinging to his arm, watching him with a shining belief that made Rorie's throat tighten. Rorie wondered if Bradik would have pursued this plan with quite so much abandon if it had been to free anyone but Calla.

Rorie had seen Loris ko Puli, their de facto leader now that Calantha was gone, watching them, eyes glinting in the dim light. Loris had heard their whispers; half the others in the cells had. But he hadn't spoken up to encourage them, or dissuade them, and they hadn't asked his permission. Rorie wasn't going to ask anyone's permission to live.

Rorie didn't know how many days had passed in a dry-mouthed, stomach-cramping blur when three of the sailors came down to the hold with a bucket of pitch to seal the leaking cracks

in the sides of the ship. As usual, the prisoners gathered in the backs of the cells, as far away from the sailors as possible, but Rorie came alert when he saw Bradik creeping forward.

Pitch, he thought blearily. Bradik had said just last night that he needed something sticky to hold the pieces of his invention together; he'd tried everything else available to him, including chewed breadcrusts and the contents of the waste bucket, but nothing worked. His brother's eyes glittered as he looked at the bucket of pitch one of the sailors had put down between the cells.

As soon as the sailor's back was turned, Bradik darted out an arm and scooped out a handful of pitch. The move had been stealthy, the hold dim enough that it might not be seen—but the pitch must have been hot, because Bradik let out a gasp that had all three sailors turning his way at once.

The largest one roared and pulled the bucket away, snarling about how Bradik had tried to throw hot pitch at him. They opened the cage and dragged him out, and while Bradik was protesting his innocence—claiming with surprising conviction that he had thought the bucket held food—one of the men punched him in the gut, and discovered the wire handle Bradik had been hiding in his waistband. After that they emptied the cell, shoving the other occupants into others. Calla pleaded for Bradik, until one of the men backhanded her and Bradik begged her not to provoke them. The sailors searched every inch of the cage, turning up the bits of wire, metal, and rope that Bradik had been hiding away.

A couple of children down at the other end of the hold cried at the noise of the sailors shouting and Bradik's pleading, but the people around Rorie were stonily silent. Calla had been shoved in the cell beside Rorie's. One hand cradled her cheek where the sailor had hit her, and the other clutched Rorie's through the bars.

Finally the sailors hauled Bradik up the ladder, saying they were taking him to the captain.

"He'll be all right," Rorie whispered to Calla. "Bradik always has a plan. This is probably just part of it."

She let out a desperate sound that might have been a laugh or a sob. He knew she didn't believe his words any more than he did.

A few cages down, Loris ko Puli was speaking in a soothing voice, reciting a prayer to Sotia. Rorie wanted to throw something at him.

Loris trailed off as an agonized scream came from above. Calla went rigid on the other side of the bars.

“Please,” begged Bradik’s voice from somewhere above them. “Please, no!”

Another man spoke in a lower voice, and then there was the sound of raucous laughter.

“Please!” repeated Bradik. “I won’t do it again, I promise. Please, no…” His voice trailed off into a cry, and then there was a loud clunk and a splash, followed by an awful cheer.

Calla’s eyes were wide with disbelief.

“Did they…?” asked Perna ke Noda, the woman who had lived next door to Rorie’s family all his life.

“They threw him in the water,” said an old man from Lyga. “And they’ll do the same to the rest of us if we give them reason.”

“Sotia will protect us,” said Loris ko Puli, and even through Rorie’s shock he heard the desperation in his tone.

“Like she protected my brother?” Rorie snapped, and the whispers and muttering that had broken out in the hold stopped. Rorie wanted to rip apart the ship, to smash those sailors’ heads between his hands like olives, to use the jagged piece of metal to cut out their eyes and then throw every one of them into the water, flailing blindly and streaming blood.

But Calla’s hand was still around his, her grip bone-crushingly tight. “He’s gone,” she whispered, carefully, as if tasting the words. Then her face crumpled and she fell against the bars. Rorie reached through and patted her shoulder as best he could. He whispered stupid, would-be-comforting words to her, about how he would protect her. But he would never be his brother.

Without Bradik, they both lost hope. They spent most of the next few days huddled together, the bars between them, their fingers intertwined. Rorie had never touched her before the night his brother died, but now he felt as though some part of him might slip away, a rowboat caught in the current, if he didn’t have her to moor him.

And then the ship docked, and while they were steeling themselves for what would come next—Rorie didn’t know exactly, but he’d heard of slave markets and backbreaking work in mines and quarries—two people came down into the hold, one of them with brown curls above a face that looked like his, the other a dark-skinned woman, and both spoke of apologies and regret and sending them back home. Loris ko Puli spoke to them, but Rorie just watched in bleary-eyed confusion. When a pale-faced man in a white uniform unlocked the door of the cage, Rorie attacked him with the jagged metal he’d been saving, but he was so weak that the man gently

twisted it out of his grip. Calla was the one to help him up the ladder, to explain that they weren't prisoners or slaves any longer.

They were taken to a new place full of dark tunnels and cages, but here the doors were never closed. And there was food. The woman who handed him a bowl of stew that first night was still apologizing for the taste, saying something about salt shortages, when he swallowed the last bite and licked the bowl. She smiled and made him drink two dippers of water before he fell back onto the blankets. Without a word, Calla tucked herself in beside him, and, moored again, he finally slept.

If she cried that first night, he slept too deeply to hear it, but he woke with her in his arms, and saw, in the light of the torches, that her eyes were puffy. During the day she made herself busy with the children, helping to pass out food, sorting out blankets and pillows for everyone from the ship. But whenever she passed him, she touched his shoulder, laid a hand on his hair, squeezed his arm. Perhaps to the others it looked like romance, but Rorie knew that he had become her port too. He knew that it was only because she saw Bradik's long nose and round brown eyes in his face, that when she smoothed his hair back from his forehead she was thinking of the way Bradik's hair always flopped into his eyes when he was working. But he couldn't hate her for that, any more than he could hate himself for the comfort he'd felt when she'd curled up against him to sleep.

That first day, he tried to pull himself up to help with the food, or the children, or whatever needed doing, but nearly a Shining without a real meal had done him in, and Calla made him rest. The curly-haired one who had come to the ship, Jonis ko Rikar, came to consult with Loris and Tira, and his bodyguard, a burly red-haired man named Adin, plopped down beside Rorie and started a card game. Rorie wanted to refuse—Bradik had been the cleverest card player in the village, and the sight of the cards in the big man's hands made his throat clench—but then Adin said, "I know what you're thinking, but it's not a trick. Jonis'll get you home, or die trying."

The conviction in his voice made Rorie look more closely at him. Adin had a scar on the side of his neck, and his nose looked like it had been broken at least once. "What makes you so sure?" Rorie said, surprising himself with the rasp of his voice. He hadn't spoken in days.

And Adin told him how Jonis ko Rikar had gone from a cowed cabin boy on a merchant ship to bringing the Arnath Resistance back from the edge of collapse. How he'd masterminded

attacks on weapons shipments and found a secret place for his soldiers to train, how he'd seized the chance to infiltrate the palace and become a leader in the new government that had outlawed slavery. Rorie couldn't tell if Adin really believed in all the things he said the new council supported, but he could tell that the big man believed in Jonis ko Rikar.

Rorie let the stories wash over him as he flipped the cards and replenished his pile when it ran out. They weren't playing for stakes; Rorie understood that this was nothing more than Adin's attempt to bring a bit of normalcy to them. Cristin and Flek and old Wile from the next village had joined in, and the talk went from subdued to raucous; Wile was known for telling bawdy jokes when the women weren't around. Adin's booming laugh echoed from the stone walls, and Rorie actually felt his lips curl into a smile for the first time in days.

He looked around, really looked, for the first time. The doors to the cells had been tied open, ropes securing them so the doors couldn't swing shut even by accident. Maybe that was why some people felt all right sitting inside the cells, where there were rough benches. Everything was unnaturally clean. He and his group sat at the end of the hallway, and Rorie was glad for the wall at his back. He would have gone wherever Calla had told him to last night, he'd been so dazed. He was glad she had thought to find them a place outside the bars. Less than half the people who had been on the ship were around him now; he had heard some of the others talking about how the people from Vas had taken over the front room. Their island had been the first the raiders visited, so they had been the longest in captivity; it made sense that they wanted nothing to do with bars.

The Longans had congregated back here in the hallway and inside the largest cell. That must mean that the people grouped together in the three cells to his right, all faces he didn't know, were from Lyga. It had been too dark in the hold of the ship, and he'd been too weak with thirst and hunger and heartsickness over his brother, to really pay attention to anyone outside the narrow world of his own cell and those nearby, all full of people from his island. It was curious how they had automatically kept those island divisions, even here.

At least, most of them had. Rorie spotted a familiar face with turned-up nose, and immediately felt like he was going to throw up. He hadn't known that Kale ke Foy had been taken too; the boy must have been held in a cell at the other end of the hold on the ship.

His own last words to Kira before they'd seen the raider ship spun through Rorie's mind. He'd teased her about Kale walking her home from lessons, hated the way her face had pinked with pleasure even as she had told him to stop.

Rorie put down his cards, clutching his stomach. Kale would ask him if he knew what happened to Kira, and Rorie couldn't stand to have her name in his ears.

He glanced at Kale again, wildly hoping that the boy hadn't seen him, that somehow he could hide in this place, and that was when he realized that not only was Kale not sitting with the other Longans, but he had his arm around the waist of a fair-haired Lygan girl, who was smiling up at him prettily.

Rorie's vision went black at the edges. He wasn't aware of getting up or marching into the cell where Kale sat, or grabbing him by the collar and slamming him into the bars, but he came to himself when he had Kale on the floor under him, and he was punching and slapping at that stupid nose and any other surface he could reach, choked curses coming out of his mouth.

Rorie didn't realize that Adin had followed him until the big man lifted him off Kale—physically lifted, as in, Rorie hung suspended three feet above his victim. Kale leapt to his feet, nose streaming blood, and skittered away down the hall. The girl ran after him. The Lygans had all stood up, and were glaring at Rorie. The Longans were standing now too, watching the Lygans as if ready to leap into action if any of them even thought of retaliating against Rorie. A wave of shame rolled through him; his fellow islanders didn't even know why he had attacked Kale, but they would defend him anyway.

Adin set Rorie on his feet, holding his arm tightly, and looked at the people who had come up behind him: Loris and Tira and Jonis, and two of the guards wearing white tunics. The guards had hung back and let Adin deal with him; Rorie couldn't tell if it was just because Adin happened to get there first, or they had that much faith in him.

Loris stepped forward. "What troubles, Rorie?" he said in a maddeningly reasonable tone. He was showing off for the foreigners, trying to pretend like he was a real Learned One that everyone in the islands respected.

Rorie just glared at him and wiped his face—he couldn't tell if it was Kale's blood he wiped off, or his own. His reasons were his own, and he wouldn't give them to a liginet like Loris ko Puli, not after everything else had been taken from him.

Loris squeezed Rorie's shoulder—almost painfully, though it probably looked like a friendly gesture to the others—and said to Jonis, “Perhaps you should go. I'll see you tomorrow.”

Rorie saw Adin exchange a look with Jonis as they left.

Loris didn't let go of Rorie, only steered him back to a group of cells away from the main hall and questioned him about what had happened. Rorie stared mulishly at the dark wall opposite and refused to say anything. He knew that he had lashed out at Kale because of his own grief and fear and guilt about his brother's death and this thing happening with Calla. But he wasn't about to share any of that with Loris, no matter how much the other tried to give him the concerned-older-brother act. Rorie had had an older brother, and Loris hadn't done a thing to save him.

Still, his stomach churned with shame when he thought about how he'd lost control, acted without thinking. Bradik would never have done something so stupid, so rash. Bradik would have reacted with his brain instead of his fists. That was why Calla had chosen Bradik in the first place, why she'd never looked twice at Rorie until he was the only comfort available to her.

Finally, he dully told Loris that he must have still been ill and upset, and promised to keep his fists to himself in future. He went back to his blankets and lay down facing the wall, and everyone left him alone until Calla crawled in beside him to sleep.

The next day, however, he had barely done more than glance at Kale, sitting next to the Lygan girl with his nose bandaged and his face bruised, before the other boy was in front of him, demanding to know what his problem was. Rorie's hands clenched into fists, but he forced himself to breathe. He even opened his mouth to apologize; he wouldn't be able to say Kira's name, but at least he could say he'd been sick and not thinking straight.

But Kale spoke first, in a low, sneering voice. “At least I don't have to take leavings from my dead brother.”

Rorie's arms were restrained the moment he moved forward; he hadn't realized that Cristin and some of the other Longa boys had drifted closer, sensing a confrontation. Rorie shouted and tried to shake them off.

“Told you they needed to be kept busy,” said a loud voice from the doorway. Adin stood there, with Jonis ko Rikar.

Jonis nodded. “I see that.”

Kale melted back among the Lygans, and the boys behind Rorie loosened their hold on him, but did not move away.

Rorie's face was hot with embarrassment and anger. Now Jonis would probably give him a talking-to like Loris had, treating him like a naughty little boy. It made Rorie want to punch something. Preferably Kale ko Foy's sniveling face.

Jonis stepped closer and tilted his head, considering Rorie. "You're angry," he said in a low voice. "And you should be. You've lost people. More than one, I guess."

Rorie had seen him that morning, talking to the others, asking about the islands, the ship, the raiders, listening for hours to the ones who wanted to talk. One of them had probably told him what happened to Bradik. But Rorie just stared at him stubbornly. He wouldn't talk about it. He couldn't.

Jonis shrugged. "You don't have to tell me about it. I know how it is, when your grief is the only things you have that's truly yours." Jonis looked around at the others who had come running when they'd heard the fight, and were standing awkwardly around now. "I wish I could offer you all more. This," he banged one hand on the nearest cell, making Rorie flinch, "is unacceptable. Everything that has happened to you is unacceptable. And I can't even offer you real protection, just a request to stay in the marketplace until the ship is ready to take you home." Everyone around the hall was silent; Loris had announced this to them last night, and the general consensus among the Melarim was astonishment that anyone would think they wanted to go out among the people who had tried to enslave them. Rorie thought he might not mind going out there, provided he had something sharp with him and could be assured of running into the men who had killed his brother.

"But," continued Jonis ko Rikar, gesturing to someone in the hallway, "I can at least give you this." Two guards came forward and placed a small trunk on the floor. Jonis fiddled with the lock and popped it open. Rorie didn't want to be curious about the contents of the chest, but he leaned forward just like everyone else and took in the gleam of steel—daggers and swords, many of them notched and stained.

"What does Loris say about this?" asked one of the older men.

Jonis shrugged. "That every one of you has the right to defend yourself. It's your choice." He shoved the chest toward Rorie with his foot.

Slowly, Rorie reached into the chest and pulled out a sharp knife with a brown wrapped handle. The weight of it felt good in his palm, like it might slice away the shame and the fear of the last Shining. He imagined reaching back through time and handing it to the boy he had been outside his cottage on Longa. Maybe if that boy had held a big knife like this, he could have carved the heart from the man who had killed his father, could have taken down the others and kept Calla and Bradik from ever being taken in the first place.

The other boys slid forward and took knives and swords from the chest. Rorie backed up to give them space, his eyes still on the heavy knife.

"I'm best with bow or slingshot," he said in a low voice to Adin. "I've never used something like this before." This knife made the little blade he had stabbed his father's attacker with look like a toy.

"You'll need training then," Adin replied, but his eyes were on Jonis.

"Yes," said Jonis. "There's a covered courtyard. We'll clear it out and Adin can work with you there."

"Like the Resistance," Rorie said, liking the heft of the word in his mouth. It was an important word, one that sounded like heroes and change, not just scared kids like him fighting to stay alive.

Adin smiled grimly, but Jonis looked troubled. "You have the right to defend yourself," Jonis said. As a response to what Rorie had said, it didn't make sense, but Rorie was too busy slashing his new knife through the air to care.

Later that afternoon they started mucking out the courtyard, which must have been used as an animal yard for the last hundred years, given how much filth they had to shovel. One half had been cleared already, but only because that was where the three large hearths that constituted the building's kitchen had been set up. The courtyard was covered with a kind of wire screen, and there were no doors except the one back into the building, but the dappled sunlight on his arms as he worked was a relief. And, if he admitted it to himself, the walls were a little comforting. Inside these walls, he didn't have to look at the people who had killed his best friend and his father and his brother.

He slept deeply that night, and more so the next, after Adin and Jonis spent the afternoon teaching them sword drills and knife blocks and all the dirty tricks they had learned fighting in the alleys of the City of Kings. He felt Adin's eyes on him, knew the big man was making sure

he didn't snap again like he had on Kale. But the fighting yard, as they called it, had cracked something open inside Rorie. When he held that heavy knife, he no longer felt like he was drifting away; when he was panting from Adin making them run around the courtyard one hundred times, he wasn't panting from fear. He felt full of something long held inside him. He'd never been as strong and steady as his oldest brother Darsh, or as smart and inventive as Bradik, but his restless energy and quick reactions didn't feel like a liability anymore. Not when he could disarm Cristin so fast that Adin let out a low whistle of appreciation, or when he could pin Wile's arms to his sides even though the man had six inches on him.

"Well done today," Jonis said to him as the others were filing back inside after a lesson a few days later. Maybe Adin's respect for Jonis was rubbing off on Rorie, or maybe it was the way Jonis hadn't made him tell his story, had given them these weapons and these lessons to use them, but Rorie found that these simple words from Jonis swelled his chest with pleasure.

Or maybe it had something to do with the fact that Calla was sliding bread out of the nearest hearth, and shot him a look of unabashed pride that told him she had heard.

Something burst open inside of him. This was something he could do. He could fight. He could defend her, as Bradik never could have. The thought came with an undercurrent of shame, but not enough to keep him from walking over to her as Jonis left the courtyard. Rorie and Calla were alone as he took the second paddle and helped her place the bread on the flat boards they used for serving trays.

"It's good to see you up and moving," she said.

"It's good to move."

She leaned her paddle against the wall and held out her hand to him. He took it—it had been at least three hours since they had last touched, and he recognized it as nothing more than their constant need to re-tether themselves.

But the warmth of her hand triggered a blaze of heat in his stomach. Maybe he was still high on the thrill of the fighting, on the pride of Jonis's words, on the knowledge that this was something he could do better than his brothers. Whatever it was, he couldn't hold it back. He tugged her closer and kissed her. She let out the slightest startled breath, and then her hand was cupping his cheek and she was pressing herself closer to him, leaving no doubt about whether his attentions were wanted.

They came apart slowly. Rorie's first instinct was to apologize...but he'd never been less sorry for anything in his life. Calla just smiled at him and said they needed to take the bread inside.

He thought she was avoiding him that night; no matter how he tried to catch her eye, she was too busy listening to little Arin's stories or making sure old Sana had enough blankets. Bradik's ghost seemed to hover at his shoulder, whispering that he was the worst excuse for a brother, the worst excuse for a man, that the gods had ever put upon the earth. Did he really think that he could protect Calla, when he hadn't been able to protect Kira? When he hadn't been able to do a thing to help Bradik?

But then, long after the torches had been doused and Rorie was wrapped up in his blanket, pretending to sleep, Calla crawled in beside him. He couldn't see her face, but he wondered if she had been crying. Instead of curling up with her back to him, as they had slept for the past few nights, she lay on her side facing him.

He started to ask if she was all right, but she placed a finger on his lips. She scooted closer, put her hands on his cheeks, and kissed him until he was breathless. It made the kiss in the courtyard seem chaste and sweet; she writhed against him, and he caressed her hip through the fabric of her dress. He let his lips slide over her cheek, her chin, down her neck and over her collarbone, and his nose nudged aside the neckline of her dress as his mouth went lower. He heard her sharp, sweet breathing above him, and held in a moan as she moved her hand down over his backside.

His fingers found the hem of her dress and traced up her leg. She shuddered softly. If there hadn't been people a few feet away, everywhere around them, he would have unlaced her dress, lifted it over her head, and he had a feeling she would have let him. Ink and stone, if she didn't stop, he might do it anyway.

A tide rose in him, washing away all the pain and shame and fear, and Calla was no longer his mooring, but the current he would happily drift away on.

And then her hand brushed over the part of him that made it very clear that his body approved entirely of what she was doing, and he almost yelped. He pulled back, breathing hard, and whispered, "We have to stop."

He had the strange feeling that she was about to ask why, but then she sighed, her breath stirring the hair against his sweating forehead, and whispered, "I know." She touched his cheek,

and planted a chaste kiss on his lips, and rolled over so that her back was to him. Rorie adjusted his trousers and settled in behind her, only slightly embarrassed by what she would now be feeling against her backside. She'd been responsible for it, hadn't she?

She pulled his arm around her, and he slid his palm under the fabric of her dress by her collarbone, but only so that he could feel her heart beating like a wild rabbit's. He kissed her neck and tried to slow his breathing, and they both stared into the darkness for a long time before sleep found them.

Over the next three days, it became their new normal, though they didn't speak of it: soft exchanges and brief touches throughout the day, quiet writhing under the blankets at night as they pushed themselves to the edges of their ability to pull back and stop their wandering fingers and exploring mouths. It took him hours to fall asleep, pressed up against Calla with every nerve scraped raw with longing, but he never chose to sleep anywhere else. He couldn't help wondering if she had been so forward with Bradik; he couldn't imagine it. Their life on Longa had been nothing like this. Calla might be proud of him, but she didn't believe in him like she'd believed in Bradik. That was all right; he wasn't his brother. He was something else, and this thing with Calla was like nothing he'd experienced before. It was need, pure and simple, for both of them. No one else, he thought, could really understand.

One day Jonis and Adin didn't come in the afternoon, and Loris gathered them all in the large cage-lined hallway that was the only place that would fit everyone. Someone, he told them, had killed the captain of the slaver ship. A cheer went up among the Melarim; what could it be but Sotia exacting her vengeance? In the tumult of celebration, Rorie pulled Calla close and kissed her.

"We'll go home soon," he whispered into her ear, but he wasn't sure she even heard him. Sana and an old man from Vas had started a dance circle, and the younger children were jumping and chanting the fair-fortune song. Across the crowd, Rorie glimpsed Loris watching the dancing with a troubled expression on his face.

Loris was the only one in a sulk; the mood among the Melarim was positively celebratory after that. They were boarding a ship for home the next day. The sniping and grouchiness that had taken hold in the dark, close quarters evaporated; everyone was a bit more considerate, a bit more forgiving. Rorie had almost forgotten what hope felt like, but it enveloped everyone now.

He was feeling too good to forego the fighting practice that day, even though they had no one to teach them. He wasn't the only one; most of the boys and men followed him to the courtyard, and his heart flipped when he saw Calla perched on a rock by the hearth, having abandoned all pretense of doing anything but watching him. Maybe it was her smile that gave him the confidence to take charge, putting the men into pairs and suggesting which drills to practice.

He was buoyant, his crackling energy fully returned; when the others started drifting away, Rorie felt he could have kept going for hours more. Calla laughed as he splashed water on his sweaty face from the rain barrel at the side of the yard.

"Hummingbird," she said affectionately.

Rorie took more time than was necessary wiping his face on his tunic. That was what his brothers had called him, teasing him for the way he couldn't sit still. Bradik had started it, annoyed by Rorie's constant fiddling with his quills and popping around the cottage while Bradik was trying to read or work on some invention.

When Rorie finally looked up at Calla, she was still smiling, but her eyes were sad. He took her hand and kissed it.

He really couldn't sit still, so he flitted about helping the women prepare the meal, playing a toss game with the younger boys, helping draw water for the stone tubs near the front of the building. With so many people sharing the small space, only about fifty of them could bathe on any given day. That meant that they were all a bit smelly, but it was nothing to the stink on the ship. Rorie often thought that when he got home, he would lie in the shallows off Ibis Point for hours. The tubs here were shallow: they hadn't been designed for relaxed soaking, but for dumping water over frightened, shackled captives to get them ready for the slave market. That was how the Melarim would have encountered these tubs if things hadn't changed. Tira and Loris seemed to think they should be grateful that at least they weren't slaves. As if what they had gone through was somehow justified because it could have been worse.

As Rorie refilled his bucket, Loris passed in the hallway outside—wearing a cloak. Frowning, Rorie followed him all the way to the heavy front doors.

As Loris put his hand on the bar, Rorie spoke. "Where are you going? It's nighttime."

Loris started. "I need to go out for a bit."

“Out,” Rorie repeated. “You said we’re supposed to stay in the market.” Never mind that, as far as he knew, none of the islanders had ventured out those front doors except Loris.

Loris smoothed one hand down the front of his tunic; it hung to his mid-thigh, with slits up the sides, in the same style the raiders had worn. “I need to go and...see about something.”

“Like reconnaissance?” asked Rorie, perking up. He’d had to ask Adin what that word meant after hearing him and Jonis use it. “Can I come too?” He wasn’t sure what had made him offer; he hadn’t had the least desire to leave this building in days, but the confidence of this afternoon must still have been running in his veins.

“No,” said Loris sternly. “Stay here.”

Something in Loris’s tone made Rorie narrow his eyes. “Why didn’t Jonis come today?” he asked.

Loris sighed and looked back down the hallway. “Jonis is fine,” he said. “But I don’t think we’ll see him again.”

“Why?” demanded Rorie.

“Why? What? How? Shall I write you an answer scroll?” snapped Loris, and the anger twisting his features was so foreign on his usually imperturbable face that Rorie actually took a step backward. “Someone tried to kill Jonis for helping us, because that, apparently, is how wretched this world is. And now there’s fighting in the streets.”

Rorie stared at him for a long moment. So that was why Loris hadn’t celebrated the news about the raiders like the rest of them. “So what are we going to do about it?” he said at last. “We can fight, you know. Some of the boys are just learning, but we still have—”

Loris just shook his head. “I need to get out of here. Go finish drawing water, or kiss your girl, or do whatever you have to in order to get through the night.”

Loris shoved open the door, spoke to the guards on the other side, and then it slammed in Rorie’s face.

Fury rose in Rorie, swift and certain—it seemed always to be lurking right under the surface these days. Loris wanted them to be mice hiding in this little hole, while he was out there, wandering around, making nice with the people of this city, the ones who had been sending slavers to the islands for hundreds of years. Loris had responded to Bradik’s death with empty prayers and promises, but no action. And he was doing the same thing now, telling the Melarim to be patient, to sit around in these old slave pens and be grateful that their situation wasn’t even

more awful. And when their one ally in this goddess-forsaken place was attacked, he didn't even tell the others.

Rorie realized he was gripping the knife at his belt. He was sick of being a piece for others to move around, like a stone in a village game of Hop-the-Nut. He put the bucket down in the hallway and went to find Calla.

She understood why he was angry; maybe she would understand better than anyone else here. But she smoothed his hair back from his forehead and spoke softly in his ear, her calm voice reminding him that they would be going home tomorrow, and the problems of this city wouldn't be theirs any longer.

He sighed. "I suppose we'll have enough of our own problems at home," he said, looking sideways at her.

She stiffened, then smiled, and put her arms around him. When her lips met his, the kiss held all their usual passion, but for the first time he suspected that she had kissed him to shut him up. He needed her skin under his fingers too much to care.

Hardly anyone slept that night. None of them had much to pack—just the trunk full of wax writing tablets the council had given them, and an extra set of clothes each. The men and boys had their weapons, of course, but they never put those down. Rorie suspected that the others intended, as he did, to keep that knife in his belt all the time, even after they returned to Longa and Lyga and Vas.

But everyone staying up talking meant that he and Calla didn't get their quiet time under the blankets, and Rorie's pent-up energy had no outlet. He was so restless that Calla finally made an annoyed sound and rolled away from him. That stung, though Rorie knew she was half-asleep and hadn't meant to offend. Sighing, he sat up and joined the card game in progress a few feet away, just for something to do, but he rested his hand on Calla's ankle where it poked out from under the blanket, to keep himself moored.

Sana had joined the men for the game, and Wile was teasing her about the dire predictions she had been making about the next morning. While the rest of the Melarim had been floating along on buoyant energy and hope since Loris had told them about the captain's death, Sana had

told anyone who would listen that the murder was a sign of a city out of control; if their council couldn't keep its own people safe, why did anyone think they would send the Melarim home?

As Sana was known for seeing the worst in every situation, the others laughed her off. She had been certain, when they'd come to this place, that the council's claims were all a ruse designed to make them submit to slavery without a fight.

"Just you wait," she said. "They'll give some reason why we can't leave."

Rorie focused on the cards in his hand. He hadn't told anyone but Calla about the attack on Jonis—she'd convinced him that telling them would only quell the desperately needed hope that had infused the Melarim.

The next morning, the Melarim blinked in the bright sun as they left the wretched place that had been their home for eight days. Rorie and Calla, hand in hand, sat on the low stone wall that surrounded the market and tipped their faces back to enjoy the sunlight while they waited for the carriages that would take them to the docks. The market in the distance was quiet. It felt silly, now, that they hadn't come outside before.

Rorie squeezed Calla's hand. "We'll be home by Fourth Shining," he said. "Maybe sooner."

Calla sniffled, and Rorie's eyes popped open. Tears were coursing down her face. "Not all of us," she said quietly.

"No. Not all of us."

Calla took a deep breath. "Rorie," she started, and his insides warmed to hear her say his name out loud like that. He'd only ever heard it as a ragged whisper in his ear when his lips were moving over her skin. He'd never before heard it in the sunlight. "When we get home to Longa...things will be...different."

Rorie's throat tightened. He nodded. "I know. It will be hard, at first, for our families to accept. They won't understand how it happened." He wasn't sure he understood how it had happened, but somewhere in the last eight days Calla had gone from being his comfort to something much more, and he couldn't imagine his life, here or back home, without her.

Calla looked at him, her mouth dropping open a little. "Rorie," she said again, and though her tone was gentle, he tensed as if preparing for a blow. If his name on her lips had been a ray of sunshine earlier, it was a raincloud now. "We...can't be together back home. This has to stop. We should stop it now, so we have time to..." She trailed off, tugging her hand from his to make a vague gesture in the air.

Though he still sat on the stone wall beside her, he was spinning like a ship caught in a whirlpool. “You’re worried about what people will think,” he said dully.

She tugged on a lock of light brown hair nervously. “Aren’t you?”

He shook his head, the anger that lived under his skin rising to the surface. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could sit here on this wall. “Bradik would want me to protect you.”

Calla’s nostrils flared. “And that can only be done by sticking your hand up my dress?”

Rorie did jump up then. “No,” he said. “You don’t get to act like you haven’t wanted this too.”

Calla looked away. “And what about Kira?” she said in a small voice.

Rorie hesitated, arrested by the awful hope her words had raised in him. What if they returned to Longa to find that Kira was still alive? What would he do then? Would Kira be hurt if she saw Rorie and Calla emerge hand in hand from the ship, or would she be too busy throwing herself at Kale?

Both scenarios held different kinds of pain, but he would take either over the one he thought more likely: that Kira’s body had long since been wrapped in linen and taken to the burial cave.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. He took Calla’s hand—it was cold in his—and looked into her eyes. “I don’t know what will happen when we get home. But I know this has been...” He fumbled for the right words to make her understand how her smiles had sustained him.

“It’s been a convenience,” she said bitterly, but she didn’t let go of his hand. “That’s all. And when we get home it won’t be convenient anymore, so what’s the point of pretending?”

The carriages arrived then and they packed a dozen people each into carriages meant for six. Rorie and Callie climbed in, silent amid the excited chatter, and rode toward the docks wedged in beside one another.

Rorie knew Calla had been speaking sense—he’d found that she usually did—but he couldn’t help it; he knew there were looming impossibilities before them, but he wanted her beside him, and he wanted his home, and he wanted his family. He’d felt her reaching for him too often to believe that she would avoid him when they got back to Longa. The tether between them was too strong; whatever happened next, the things they had seen together and had been to each other would connect them for the rest of their lives.

No matter what she said, he couldn't help the hope that rose and floated within him like a feather on the breeze. They were going home, and Calla was by his side, and he had a sturdy knife in his belt that he knew how to use. He wouldn't be the victim of monsters again.

When Calla started blinking rapidly, her eyes watering, Rorie thought she was crying. Only when the smoke tickled his nostrils did he realize. And when he leaned out the carriage window and saw the ships burning in the harbor, the floating feather inside him burst into flames too.

Five days. It had been five days since the docks had burned and the Melarim had returned to the slave pens they'd thought they had left behind forever.

Five days since Calla had looked at Rorie. Five days he had spent working himself into a lather in the training yard and sleeping alone at night. She'd made her wishes clear, and he would not force his company upon her.

And yet, when the newest attackers came, led by the Qilarite with the strange clump of black hair who spoke over and around the Melarim as if they were cattle, his first thought was to find her, to put himself near her, so that he could protect her. He ignored Loris's shouted orders and fought his way to her side.

And he shielded her when the sailors had chopped off Loris's hand, roaring that they'd do the same to everyone there if they didn't get into the cells. None of them needed any more convincing after that; they already believed in the wicked cruelty of Qilarites. They watched the cruel men drag Jonis off, declaring that they would throw him into a pit.

It was a long, dull, quiet day full of fear. If Bradik had been there, he would have been hatching a plan, but Rorie was done with plans. How many times had he tried, and failed? How many times had his people been promised hope, and had it snatched from them?

Calla stared at the wall, dry-eyed. Rorie couldn't help remembering the constant sobs around them on the ship, but now all the Melarim were eerily silent. Perhaps none of them had any tears left.

All the sitting and the silence gave Rorie time to think. He hadn't let go of Calla's hand for hours when excitement erupted outside the cells. There were sailors out there, and men, and he didn't understand everything they were saying—their accents were so thick and they were banging on about things he didn't understand. But the sight that greeted him when he crept closer

told him all he needed to know: Jonis ko Rikar lying on the ground, with a big Qilarite stepping on his back. Two of the Qilarite guards who'd sometimes come with Jonis were there too, on their knees, being held by sailors. Rorie didn't see Adin anywhere, and knew, with a sudden flash of dread, that the big red-haired man was dead.

Adin loved Jonis, he thought. He'd never have allowed him to be captured if he was alive.

Love. The word echoed through his mind, tingled under his skin. He had no idea what it meant, not really, but he knew what it looked like. What it felt like.

Someone nudged him through the closest bars. "Loris has the keys," came a whisper, soft as breath in his ear. "Get ready to fight. Spread the word."

Love was the thing you fought for.

Rorie leaned across to tap a young man seated across from him, and didn't flinch when he saw that it was Kale ko Foy. He passed on the message, then tugged Calla into the back of the cell and used the cover of the voices outside—they'd grown louder, and a female voice was now among them, but the words were just noise to him. He had to make Calla understand.

"We're going to fight them," he whispered to Calla. "Do you understand? We're going to get out of here, all of us. And then...I'm going to fight for us, too."

Calla frowned. "Rorie, you don't—"

"You're not a convenience, not to me. Do you think anything about this is convenient, Calla?" He squeezed her hand. "Whatever this is, it happened, and I won't call it wrong. Maybe...maybe I never would have loved you if Bradik lived. Maybe I would have realized it after you were married and I would have been miserable the rest of my life wanting you. Or maybe..." He swallowed hard. "Maybe I would have married Kira and been happy, and never known what we could be. But it happened, Calla. We happened, and I love you, and I'm going to fight for you. And if we don't get out of here alive, or if we do and you decide you don't want me, at least I'll know I fought for it. All right?"

His voice had risen at the end, and Kale shushed him angrily, but Rorie saw Calla's eyes shining with unshed tears in the dim light.

She touched his cheek. "All...all right," she whispered.

Rorie leaned forward to kiss her, but the hallway outside erupted into fighting. They were nearly trampled as the others raced to the bars, ready to fight. Rorie pulled Calla up, urging her to stay back against the wall. He pressed one urgent kiss to her lips and turned to fight.

~**~

Rorie paced the white sand anxiously. Though it had been nearly a year since he and Kira had sighted the raider ship on this very beach, since he had watched his best friend race off with an arrow shaft in her shoulder, he hadn't gotten over the habit of glancing nervously at the horizon whenever he was outdoors. He doubted that he ever would, no matter how Jonis ko Rikar and Soraya Gamo had insisted, during their sendoff of the Melarim, that Qilara was now a friend to the People of Sotia. No matter how hard Kirol Tarn, Qilara's ambassador to the islands, worked to ingratiate himself to the people here. They had been back on Longa for Shinings now, but Rorie hadn't slept without a knife in ready reach since they had returned.

Goddess, after today, he might have to increase that to two knives.

Sana appeared at the end of the path and hailed him. "You can come now!" she called, then turned back into the trees without waiting for a response.

Rorie sped after her, and caught up to her before she reached the turnoff to the women's cottage. There was only one reason that the men of the village were ever allowed inside, and Rorie's throat tightened painfully as he approached it.

Sana gave him a sideways look. "All is well," she said, her usual glum tone making it sound like she was almost sorry about it.

But Rorie didn't have any attention to spare for her; all of it was focused on the glowing, sweaty face that greeted him from the bed when Sana pushed open the door of the cottage. Calla's light brown hair was pulled back from her face, and the year-long ink of their marriage symbols were just beginning to fade on her forearms. She met Rorie's eyes, beaming, then looked down at the blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms.

"It's a boy," she said. She couldn't seem to stop looking at the baby.

When Rorie moved closer and took her hand, he couldn't either. The baby—his baby—had perfect cheeks and a long nose like his, and light brown curls like Calla. The boy's eyes were closed in contentment, his little lips pursed slightly.

Rorie knelt by the side of the bed, his relief overflowing into tears that coursed down his face. After all they had been through, he'd been terrified of losing Calla to childbirth. But here she was, whole and safe, and she had given him this gift. A son.

This would mean a whole new round of village gossip—the scandalized talk about their marriage had finally abated, and Kira’s mother had only just started speaking to him again—but Rorie didn’t care. He couldn’t care about anything else. All his happiness sat on this bed, right now. He couldn’t even regret the raider ship, if that was what had brought him here. If that made him a terrible person, he would accept that.

Calla looked up at him, apprehension in her eyes. “What shall we name him?”

He smoothed her hair and kissed her forehead. “There’s really only one choice, isn’t there?” he said softly.

He felt her relax under his hand. She smiled.

“Yes,” she said, then looked down at the baby in her arms. “Welcome to the world, little Bradik.”

About the Author

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