

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

The Captain

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First Edition

The Captain

Gelti

*This story takes place before and during
Chapters Thirty and Thirty-one of Sword and Verse.*

IT WAS HARDLY past sunrise bells when the summons came from the High Priest of Aqil. Kirol was the messenger, and he made no attempt to hide his disgust for the High Priest.

Couldn't allow that. "Lieutenant," I snapped. "You will speak with respect of your betters."

His eyes widened, which gave me a pang, and he looked around the empty guardroom.

I sighed and rested a hand on his shoulder. "I'm not your cousin when you're on duty. Can't have the other guards thinking you get privileges."

Other than the privilege, of course, of wearing lieutenant's pips less than a year out of training. But what was the point of selling my soul if I couldn't spread the rewards around to my family?

"Yes, sir," he said, his tone making my mouth tighten. He saluted and turned to leave, but I grabbed his shoulder and turned him back to face me.

"Is there a problem, Lieutenant?"

Kirol's eyes narrowed in a way that I would have called insubordination from any other guard. "Why do you let the High Priest order you around? He's not the king."

Keep your temper, I told myself. "Is that what you think? He orders me around?" And maybe better to say: not the king yet. "Perhaps I am working under orders from the king, orders my junior lieutenants are not privy to."

Kirol heard the danger in my tone, and his forehead wrinkled. "Of course. Sir." He frowned, but he couldn't seem to let it go. "But...there's something about the High Priest that...troubles me. Sir." I continued to watch him, my impassive expression not betraying my suddenly pounding heart, and he squirmed. "I can't explain why, exactly, but I don't think he can be trusted. I just have this feeling—"

"A feeling," I repeated skeptically, as if I hadn't taught him myself how a guard's intuition is one of his keenest tools for identifying threats. But damn him and his observant nature. I had enough to deal with. I didn't want my cousin getting mixed up in this.

Kirol flushed to his hairline. “Sorry, Captain,” he mumbled, and hurried out of the room. I let him go.

I pushed aside the cold remains of my breakfast and went to see what the High Priest wanted now. Another bribe to be delivered to a ship captain, perhaps, or a threatening message to another councilor. Not like I could say no to whatever it was, no matter how petty, not when he was the one who’d put me in the post of captain.

Funny how I never used to mind it, doing his bidding, back when King Tyno was alive. It didn’t feel like treachery then, supporting Rale’s effort to keep King Tyno’s weak-willed son off the throne.

But now that King Tyno was gone and the worst had come to pass, it hadn’t turned out to be so bad. King Mati was nothing like his father—his father had been a great king for certain—but neither was he the sap that the council had expected. Maybe that was why they worked so hard to undermine him now.

It had taken me a long time to admit it to myself, that there was something about this new king not to be sneered at. He’d taken charge before his father’s body was even cold, sending me out to quietly investigate the councilors to determine if any of them had been behind the king’s death. The High Priest of Aqil had been the only councilor without an alibi, so I had invented one for him—couldn’t afford to have him blabbing about me while he was burning. Besides, why would Rale assassinate the king before he’d been named as regent?

And the way King Mati had gone after the Resistance, even letting me try some of the traps I’d been itching to set for them. Didn’t work, but I appreciated that he listened to the suggestion. His father never had.

And, I thought as I stood before the High Priest of Aqil in the council chamber, where he’d stationed himself as if this were his private audience room, at least King Mati spoke to his guards with some measure of politeness. It was disarming, if not especially kingly, and probably made more than one guard feel a bit guilty about the bribes they took from Rale. Didn’t stop them from taking those bribes any more than it had stopped me from answering Rale’s summons, but it made them feel a twinge about it.

“Captain,” said Rale, as soon as the door had shut behind me. “So glad you could join me. I have quite particular orders for you this morning. The timing is critical, I am afraid.”

I bristled at his phrasing. Orders. But, as he had so often reminded me, my position, Kirol's position, my mother's house in the Web—all of these things could easily be taken away at his whim. I couldn't bring myself to address him politely, so I just jerked my head in a nod, without taking my eyes off of his fat face. He looked...elated. That sent dread creeping down my neck.

“Listen carefully,” he said. “Today, just after midmorning bells, you will arrest Raisa ke Margara and bring her before the Scholars Council.”

“For what offense?”

He let out a tutting sound, as if to say that no other offense than to be an Arnath and a Tutor was required. And while I didn't disagree with him, I also had to at least pretend to be doing my job.

“Failing to burn her writing, of course.” He leaned forward, his smile splitting his pudgy cheeks. “That little one, that Jera. I've been questioning her, and she told me an extraordinary story of finding unburnt pages in the Adytum, and the Tutor acting strangely about it. She's got more, no doubt. This is opportunity we have been waiting for, to destroy those wretched Tutors.”

I frowned. “But if there is no solid proof—”

Rale shrugged. “I searched the Adytum top to bottom—”

“You did what?” I gripped my sword.

Rale waved me off and went on, so sure—too sure—that the consequences of such an action would not apply to him. “The cagey girl must have already moved them. I suspect,” he said, tapping the side of his nose, “that she is carrying them on her person.” He laughed. “Which is why you and your men must strip search her.”

The thought repulsed me, for many reasons. “And if we find nothing on her?”

Rale laughed. “Oh, you will.” He held out a folded piece of paper, paper that was thicker than any I had ever seen. Not that I'd made a habit of looking too closely at papers—wasn't prudent for anyone not of Scholar birth to get to close to anything smacking of writing—but I had seen enough Scholars clutching the stuff to know that this was a kind of paper no scribe or even councilor would use. It must have been some special stock of the Tutors, or even of the royals themselves. I clenched my teeth; Rale had probably stolen it from the sacred courtyard.

“You'll have to actually take it, Captain, if you are to plant it on her,” said Rale acidly.

And once it was in my keeping, he could incriminate me easily. I saw the knowledge of that flash in his eyes as I reached out and took the paper. But I'd already thrown my lot in with this demon—what was one more step down that road?

I thrust the paper into the inside pocket of my uniform without looking at it. Wouldn't do any good, since I couldn't read any of those bedamned squiggles and I didn't want to.

Rale's superior little smile made me want to punch his fat face. I reminded myself, as I so often had, that the western vizier, Del Gamo, was in this too, that he was a man worth following even if Rale was not.

"Take her just after midmorning bells, remember," said Rale. "I want the entire council here when she is brought in, so the king can't make excuses. That business with his cousin was far too suspicious." He let out a derisive snort. "Escaped in the night. I'm sure."

I bristled. I had led that raid, on the king's orders, and the traitor Patic Kone really had escaped. I suspected that someone inside the palace, perhaps even among my own guards, had tipped him off. But the king hadn't hesitated to order his cousin brought back to face execution.

And if he'd sagged in relief when I brought him the news of Kone's escape, I couldn't really blame him. I had a cousin too.

I grimaced at my thoughts. It wasn't seemly to have fellow-feeling with the king, for many reasons. For one, it didn't change what I had to do, just made it damned uncomfortable.

But I couldn't very well say any of that to Rale, so I just asked, "Anything else?"

I'd purposely left off any title of respect, and he noticed. "Careful, Captain," he said softly. "I know what's in your pocket."

I couldn't look at his frog-like face for one second more. "I have arrangements to make," I said, forcing myself to give a nod that could have been interpreted as respectful, and then I turned and left the council chamber.

I made the rounds of the posts and rearranged guard shifts, so that those most indebted to Rale would be in the guardroom when I called for them at midmorning—and so that Kirol would be at the front gate, far from the nonsense taking place in the council chamber. I didn't need him and his instincts anywhere near this mess.

We were still holding a couple of servants from the villa Patic Kone had been renting in the city, so I vented my feelings by heading down to the dungeon to question them. They didn't tell

me anything I didn't already know, but I roughed them up a little so they'd think twice about following in their master's footsteps.

Didn't realize until midmorning bells rang that I'd been half-hoping I wouldn't be able to hear them down in the dungeon. But of course those bells rang everywhere, a reminder that no one could escape the laws that ran things here, not even those that ordered time.

I frowned at the morbid thought as I climbed the stairs and prepared to gather my guards. I'd been thinking things like that often lately, and I didn't know exactly why. It wasn't my place to question the Scholars.

My earlier rearrangement of duty schedules had done its work—the main guardroom was full of the nastier sort when I arrived.

Except that Peron sat in one corner. I cursed inwardly. How could I have forgotten him? He'd not only refused Rale's bribes, he had reported them to the king. No wonder he sat by himself, looking warily at the others. He might be a lummox, but even he could see what kind of men they were.

"Peron," I barked. "Go up to the west floodwall tower and relieve Anlir. I need him down here. Stay there until the end of your shift."

"Yes, sir," he said at once. He looked grateful for the opportunity to get away. He ought to have been more grateful for the fact that I didn't penalize him for his jacket being buttoned wrong—again.

Once he was gone, I looked around the room. All right, time to get this over with. "Rian, Ots, Halder, Pritt, and...Jad. With me." Half a squad ought to do it. Rale might have envisioned more, but this was my command, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

I sent Rian and Halder to question the servants on the second floor, Ots and Pritt to the second, and kept Jad with me—the maids tended to hide when they saw him coming. Within minutes Rian and Halder had returned with the news that the Tutor was in the garden with the little one.

So that was where we headed. I didn't tell my men why we were going there, but with all that had been happening, they had to have a good idea. After all, every single one of them had Rale's coins jingling in his pockets.

I knew right where she would be—King Tyno had had me track her movements often enough in the days after his son was seen leaving her room, and there was a certain bench she favored. She was sitting there, beside the little one, and they were twisting flowers into crowns. At least, the little one was, her dark head bent over her task. But the Tutor must have heard us coming—her head was up, her face even paler than usual as she watched us tramp into the clearing.

Flower crowns. When I thought of all the privileges this tialik had, when hardworking Qilarites had to water their soup and work their hands to the bone, it was easy to ignore the uncomfortable feeling that reminded me how thoroughly I was going against the oaths I had taken when I joined the guard.

I remained silent, letting her fright multiply itself.

She kept her eyes on me but touched the little one's shoulder. "Jera, run up and see Laiyonea."

As soon as the girl was gone, I spoke. "Tutor, you are summoned before the Scholar's Council on charge of treason against the crown."

She tried to speak then, but I ignored her. Wasn't interested in anything she had to say. "You will first be searched." Her face went a few shades paler, if possible.

She rose from the bench. "Searched?"

I gritted my teeth. Defiance would not be tolerated. Tutor she may be, but she was still a slave. And once Rale was done with her, she wouldn't even be Tutor any longer.

"Unfasten your hair," I said, motioning Rian and Jad forward. I saw realization dawn in Rian's eyes; he'd been there when the previous Tutor had admitted to smuggling papers in her hair, so as soon as the Tutor had unbraided her coppery Arnath hair, he seized her head and poked through it none too gently. She let out a cry, which I ignored.

"Nothing," Rian said, pushing her away. He almost seemed disappointed.

The Tutor's eyes were wet now, but she wouldn't find sympathy here. I nodded in response to Rian, then said to the Tutor, "Now unfasten your dress."

Her face showed her defiance, so before she had a chance to open her mouth, I gestured to Rian and Jad. Rian did balk then—apparently he had a soft spot for female prisoners. I'd have to remember that. But Jad, unsurprisingly, showed no such hesitation. He unlaced the front of her dress swiftly and whipped it off her shoulders, in a move he often bragged about using on

whores. Ots actually laughed out loud, as if remembering the stories Jad had told. I would have reprimanded them both for such behavior, except that it seemed to unnerve the prisoner even more, and unnerved prisoners made interrogations easier.

Her shift was thin, revealing enough for every man there to see that Arnath women had the same parts as Qilarite ones, at least.

The Tutor seemed to be holding her breath. Maybe hoping that this was the end of it?

It could be, I realized. I could order Rian to bring me her dress, and slip Rale's confounded paper into it.

But what did I care? Why did I want to save this tialik any embarrassment? It didn't matter to me if her cheeks burned or her eyes shone with humiliated tears. She would die soon enough, because Rale would make sure of it. All I could do was play my part.

Jad was eyeing me, and I knew that he had registered my hesitation. I also knew that he had been spying on me for Rale, and that he probably wasn't the only one of my men doing so. And Rale would want this done properly, to have the Tutor brought as low as possible.

"Continue," I said, my tone daring any of them to question my loyalties.

Jad leered, and even Rian couldn't help a grin as the two of them grabbed her shift and lifted it over her head. The idiotic girl struggled—couldn't seem to help it, and I was suddenly, unpleasantly, reminded of Kirol in the guardroom that morning, unable to let go of his suspicions—but she was hardly a match for their strength.

"Now that's the way to take an Arnath," said Jad. "Face covered, only the parts you need showing."

Halder and Ots guffawed, and Rian grinned as he helped Jad force the shift over her head. Pritt looked like he might be ill, and I privately agreed with him. Wasn't the first time Jad had said such things—he liked to visit the Arnath brothel down in the Reach, and he liked to talk, loudly and at length, about the things he did to the slaves there. He'd been reprimanded about it more than once.

I glared at him. He'd hear about it again, and serve a tour at the tombs if he didn't stop. But then I saw what was poking out of the shift that Jad had grabbed like a victory flag.

Paper. There was paper in the Tutor's shift. By Lila's bow, Rale had been right.

My eyes moved to the Tutor, who had grabbed her dress and was holding it over her body. She'd seen the paper too, knew that I had seen it, and she looked ready to vomit.

Any small bit of sympathy I might have felt for her as a victim of Rale's plans evaporated; any doubt I'd had about taking part in this was nullified. She'd broken the law, plain and simple. My duty was clear now.

"Give me that," I said, trying to keep the relief out of my tone. Jad handed it over—reluctantly, it seemed to me—and I examined the paper. She had even sewn an extra pocket into her shift to hide it. Fool—to court death over a piece of paper? I almost laughed aloud at her stupidity. "The council will want to see this. Bring her along."

The Tutor pulled her dress on, moving like someone in a dream. I folded the cloth over so that I could carry the torn shift without touching the paper. I had to suppress a grin as I turned and led the men back to the palace, Jad and Rian gripping the prisoner's arms, the others boxing her in. No need for that. The girl looked so dazed and defeated that it probably hadn't even occurred to her to run. If Rale didn't force a confession from her during the council session, I'd be able to break her easily down in the dungeons. This one wouldn't even be a challenge.

Lud and Brigg, stationed in the entry hall, eyed us curiously as we passed, but upon my stern look, snapped back to attention. I realized, belatedly, that Rale would probably have wanted me to bring her in through the back of the palace, through the kitchen and the servants' quarters, to ensure that as many residents of the palace as possible saw the Tutor being escorted by the guards in disgrace.

I wrinkled my nose at how thoroughly I had become Rale's dog, that such a thought even rose in my mind. I was the guard captain, and this was how such a criminal was handled. I knocked sharply on the door of the council chamber. A servant opened the door, glaring at me; the councilor benches were full, and the king himself was going on about some law or other—near as I could tell he was always presenting the council with new ideas, all of which they shot down.

"Tell High Priest Rale the prisoner is here, and give him this," I said curtly, handing over the bundle. "Now."

Couldn't tell whether it was my tone or the mention of the High Priest—or perhaps the glimpse of the Tutor, surrounded by guards, that he'd gotten over my shoulder—but the servant's haughty expression faded and he nodded.

The door closed, but a few minutes later it reopened. I marched in and motioned to my men to follow. Rian and Jad thrust the Tutor into the center of the room, then stepped back. Jad pulled

out his sword, an over-the-top gesture that made me want to roll my eyes, but the other men saw him and did the same, creating a menacing ring of steel around the Tutor.

I was about to order them to sheathe their weapons, but then I saw the delighted look on Rale's face and kept my silence. I stood to one side and rested my hand on my sword. I didn't need to draw it to make a point.

The council chamber was packed. Priests from all the temples, all the greater and lesser Scholar representatives from the outlying lands, all the ministers and viziers—even the king's fiancée sitting up on one of the highest benches with a scarf over her pretty black hair. Didn't see the older Tutor anywhere, which was a surprise—thought King Mati relied on her as much as King Tyno had.

Didn't matter. All the Tutors would be finished soon anyway.

"What is the meaning of this?" said King Mati, his voice sharp, dangerous—kingly, if such a thing could be believed.

Rale rose slowly, insolence in every movement. That was when the other councilors started whispering, realizing that this was some plot of Rale's. Wondered how many of them had taken Rale's bribes too. He must have promised them some amazing things—probably more than a captain's post and a house in the Web. Maybe I should have held out for more.

Rale's smug grin was painful to see, so I shifted my eyes to the western vizier on the opposite side of the room. He watched Rale, his lip curling into a faint sneer at the man's unctuous manner. Maybe they were co-conspirators, but it was plain that the western vizier had as little patience for Rale's games as I did.

Rale lifted his hands in a commanding manner, and the whispers ceased. He made a show of reaching under the table and pulling out a bundle of cloth. Then he slowly opened it and removed the paper the Tutor had been concealing.

The false paper that Rale had given me seemed to burn against my ribcage. I swallowed, wishing that I had found a way to dispose of it before bringing the prisoner here. Rale had no reason to actually incriminate me, I reminded myself. His threats had only been insurance. I'd done what he wanted.

To my left, a hiss of air escaped the Tutor's lips.

Rale smiled, so sure that he had orchestrated everything perfectly. "I submit evidence of treachery from this...Tutor," he said. "This page was found in her undergarment."

At that, the king's eyes snapped to the Tutor, and he rose to his feet, taut as a bowstring. "And who ordered such a search?"

My mind flashed back to the pleading boy in his father's study, insisting that there was nothing between him and the Arnath girl after being caught sneaking out of her room on the morning of his betrothal. I'd assumed he'd been lying when he said nothing had happened—he'd had her, certainly—but for the first time I wondered if he had actually cared for her. That would be most inconvenient.

Rale had decided, apparently, to play the innocent. "Why, I did, Your Majesty. You see, it was something that dear child Jera mentioned that first raised my suspicion. She told me of finding papers hidden in the Adytum, and asked me, as innocent children will when puzzled by the actions of their elders, why pages would be hidden there when everything written in that space is to be burned." He turned to the Tutor with a wide smile. "Why, indeed, Tutor?"

Everyone looked at her. "Perhaps...they were left by accident," she squeaked.

I suppressed a smile. She was a terrible liar. She wouldn't even make it difficult for the council to condemn her.

"And this sheet accidentally fell into your garment?" said Rale. "Do not insult this council with lies." He turned to the other councilors. "When I searched the Adytum and her rooms and found nothing, I concluded that she had secreted the pages on her person." My hand gripped the sword hilt more tightly at this reminder of his blatant disregard of the law.

The king spoke then. "You overstep yourself," he said evenly. "The Adytum, the palace, and the Tutors are all the property of the crown, and you had no right to search any of them."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Tutor blanch. Whatever you think you are, I wanted to say to her, you are a slave still.

Rale smiled. "Why, Your Majesty, this offense is an affront to the gods themselves. As High Priest of Aqil, I felt it my duty to investigate. My responsibility to the god outweighs my adherence to mortal law."

"Convenient, that," said the king, and I had to keep myself from nodding in agreement. But the king seemed to think better of it the moment the words had left his lips. I could see that he was just beginning to realize how thoroughly Rale had played his hand against him. I almost felt sorry for him.

I shifted my weight—sometime this morning I had acquired a pebble in my left boot and it was damned uncomfortable, but there was nothing to be done about it now. The council would want more talking and arguing before they decided on the time, place, and manner of the Tutor's execution.

I tuned out the political back-and-forthing of the king and the High Priest—there was some nonsense about what the Tutor had written and whether it was coded and whether she'd been passing messages on the Resistance like the last one, as if it mattered when she had no business writing anything at all that didn't immediately go up in smoke—and went through a mental checklist of preparations for an execution. Leave would have to be curtailed. The men wouldn't like that, but then, an execution always got their blood up, so none of them would want to miss the doings around that anyway. I hoped they'd do it here, at the palace, as it would be a lot easier to keep security tight if it was done on our home turf. But I suspected Rale would want it nice and public, at the Temple of Aqil where he could control every aspect, like the last execution.

A horrified gasp stirred me from my thoughts. The Tutor was staring at the king, who stood near the firepit—he must have just dropped the paper into it. The king was looking at the Tutor, a puzzled expression on his face.

I shifted uncomfortably, hoping Rale wouldn't expect me to whip out his fake papers now that his evidence was gone.

But Rale seemed to feel he needed no such thing; everyone in the room had seen the Tutor's reaction to the destruction of that page. Again I thought, What in all Gyotia's creation could be so important? "No evidence, sire?" said Rale with a grin so wide that it made his eyes look smaller and beadier than usual.

A soft voice from the left: "We must remember that this Tutor was chosen by the gods, through the oracle." That was the High Priest of Lanea, Obal Tishe. Nice to know that someone would stand up to Rale.

"As was the last one," replied Rale with a snort.

Tishe eyed Rale with dislike, and I felt my estimation of him rising, for all the good that did anyone. "Indeed," he said, "the choices of the gods can sometimes be puzzling." He paused. "Nevertheless, this council cannot contradict the will of the gods without significant evidence. If she had passed messages to our enemies, surely we would have seen the results of such treachery. Has there been an increase in Resistance activity?"

At that, the king gestured at me. "Dimmin, report."

I stepped past the Tutor and bowed to the king, glancing at Rale warily. What would he expect me to say now? I had no idea—his game was bigger than my part in it.

So I decided to go with the truth. "Disruptions in the city have been minimal since the coronation, Your Majesty," I said crisply. "Other than the escape of the traitor Patic Kone and his slave, we have seen no sign of the Resistance at all. As I reported previously, our attempt to bait them with the weapons shipment at the pass failed." That rankled, to announce that—it had been my idea, after all, and I'd been so sure it would work. But the fierce look on his face seemed to indicate that the king would pick at anything I said that wasn't precise truth.

The king's brow furrowed—wasn't sure why. Nothing I'd said was new information, but he acted like it was. Then he looked over at the Trade Minister, where whispering had broken out, and said sharply, "What is it?"

Minister Jin nodded respectfully. "Terin has relevant information, Your Majesty."

"Speak," the king barked at the scribe who knelt at the Trade Minister's side. I saw the looks the councilors exchanged and knew I was not the only one who was reminded of King Tyno by his forceful tone.

The scribe stood and bowed his head. "Your Majesty, councilors, some time ago I discovered rodent damage in our storage area, and the record of Eral Kone's holdings was among the most damaged. The entire slave listing was gone. At the time, we assumed that it was the work of mice, but with his son's escape, I now fear that someone tampered with our records."

The king was utterly still for a long moment—a kind of dangerous stillness that also reminded me of his father. Then he turned abruptly to Rale. "When did you find the paper on her?"

Rale's mouth twitched triumphantly. "Just moments before she was brought here, Your Majesty."

The king nodded. The fire of his anger seemed to have burned out now; however he felt about Rale skirting his authority, he finally had seemed to accept the Tutor's treachery. I glanced back and forth between Rale and the king. Something had changed. The balance of power had shifted, but I couldn't understand exactly why or when that had happened.

The king looked at me, his expression grim. "Take the Tutor to her room while the council discusses this matter."

"Post a guard outside her door," said Rale.

I looked to the king for verification—Rale might have me and half the guards in his pocket, but he wasn't king yet. King Mati nodded his agreement.

I jerked my head at Jad and Rian, and they sheathed their swords and grabbed the Tutor's arms. The Tutor looked utterly undone. She twisted her head round, unable, it seemed, to look away from the king. "Mati," she cried, and it was if the sound had come up from the depths of her soul—if the Arnathim even had souls.

And in that moment, I knew: she loved him. Maybe she'd even believed that he loved her too. But one glance at the king's cold expression as he stared at the wall, waiting for her to be removed from his presence, showed that, whatever dalliances he'd once had with her, he would not tolerate traitors.

That thought repeated uneasily in my mind as I ordered my men to see her to her rooms and stand guard outside. As soon as they had disappeared down the corridor—practically dragging the now-sobbing Tutor—I turned and made my way to a small council chamber in the west wing. I shut the door behind me and lit the firepit in the corner, then pulled Rale's confounded paper from my pocket with my fingertips and thrust it into the flame. I'd never burned paper before—that was a Scholar pastime—so I was surprised at how quickly it disintegrated into ash.

As soon as the flames had gone out, I removed the damned pebble from my boot and walked out the rear of the palace, circling back through the garden to air out my uniform. Not that anyone would notice a bit of smoke smell, I told myself. I was being paranoid.

When I slipped back into the council chamber, Rale was in the midst of describing the steps he recommended for the Tutor's execution. The king sat with his head bowed. I stepped close to the nearest door guard and whispered, "Report."

He leaned toward me. "The king and some of the councilors have argued for leniency, sir. They say execution would pose a danger to the city, rile up the Arnathim too close to the wedding."

I frowned, looking at the king. He hadn't minded killing Arnathim when I'd set out to take out the Resistance leaders.

Or maybe it was just this particular Arnathim dying that he had a problem with.

In my head I called myself every curse word I knew. How could I have started to respect this king, maybe even grow a bit fond of him? He did care for the girl, had probably been

conducting an affair with her all along. I saw the way his shoulders slumped, the way his face had gone pale. I'd been trained to read people, so how could I have read him wrong these last Shinings? I'd had the measure of him when he was a sixteen-year-old begging for his father's mercy. He was soft on the girl, traitor or not.

That became apparent when he rose and made his case for mercy. There was no evidence that any intentional harm had been done, he said, no evidence that she had passed messages to the Resistance or taught anyone else the language of the gods as the previous Tutor had.

"If this council does not act swiftly and brutally," responded Rale, openly sneering at the king, "we will invite further betrayals and gross violations. The Tutor system has always been dangerous, to place such power in the hands of those unworthy of holding it, if only to pass it on."

"The Tutor system," retorted the king in a voice of steel, "has always had the purpose of protecting the higher order writing, to keep it out of the hands of those who would use it to their own ends, and not for the good of this nation." His words had the ring of a verse memorized and spoken often, and the look he gave Rale made it certain that he saw the High Priest's aims clearly.

Another man might have quailed under the look the king gave him, but Rale only pressed his palms together and said, "And so it only follows that those who are entrusted with such a gift receive the most severe punishment when that gift is misused."

The western vizier rose in his place. "The Arnath problem must be resolved before the wedding. We cannot trust that this lull in Resistance activities means that they have been subdued, not when we know that there have been conspirators even in our king's own family. Public execution of the Tutor is this council's only option."

Several of the councilors murmured in agreement, and the High Priest of Lila even clapped his hands a few times.

The king drew himself up and said loudly, "If this council's only means of displaying its power is killing, then it shows itself to be weak indeed."

This was met with resounding silence; even Rale seemed taken aback. But then he laughed once, a short deliberate bark that rang against the stone walls. "Your Majesty, as one of your advisors, I must warn you that such talk will surely make your councilors fear that you are the soft-heart that your father feared you would be."

This was a low blow, even for Rale, and so breathtakingly disrespectful that it made clear to everyone in the room how far the balance of power had shifted.

King Mati's hands clenched into fists, but he merely said, in an even tone, "That is ridiculous. I have supported every effort to shut down the Resistance, even at the expense of my own family members. Failing to enjoy killing is hardly a character flaw, whatever my father would have had you believe."

That did shock them all—it was the closest the king had ever come to badmouthing his father or even alluding to their strained relationship. It was almost as if he'd been wearing a mask for years, this young ruler, and we were all watching it dissolve in the acid of this crisis.

Rale, for one, seemed delighted. He knew, I realized. He'd seen what I had, about the king and the Arnath girl. That girl was the key to controlling the king's actions, and Rale would use it for all it was worth.

Which meant, I understood with a sour taste in my mouth, that she wouldn't be executed. Rale wouldn't give up such a pawn any sooner than he had to.

The king, however, did not seem to realize this, because he had now turned to the council at large and was detailing the reasons for mercy again.

"If the girl is not executed," Rale interrupted him—an egregious offence, but the king hardly blinked, "then the Arnathim must be silenced in another way. As the western vizier has pointed out" —he bowed to Del Gamo, in a gesture more respectful than any he had shown the king in this entire meeting—"the situation must be dealt with prior to your wedding." I heard the way he emphasized that last word, saw the king's expression flicker in response.

"Yes," said Minister Jin, pushing himself up to stand at his place. "Yes, the Arnathim must be contained, must be taught a lesson, but we have seen that executing a Tutor is a messy business. It did not stop the Resistance last time, and there is no reason to think that it would do so now. This Tutor has not offended the gods as egregiously as the other did. She must be punished and removed from her post, certainly. But her execution is likely to start riots or worse." He held up a hand as Rale opened his mouth, and Rale, to my surprise, subsided and let Jin go on. "And so the Arnath population must be quelled in another way. Is it not time, my king, to send raiders to the Nath Tarin?"

The king looked as if he had stopped breathing. He sat at his place and shuffled through some papers there—I had the feeling that he was giving himself time to collect his thoughts. But

the whispers and talk that broke out all around the chamber sounded approving—the council had been pushing to send those raiders out for Shinings now, and the king had stalled them.

Rale looked utterly delighted, and smiled benevolently at Minister Jin. I wondered if Jin was in his pocket too, and found myself hoping not—it hurt to think that a man like him would follow Rale. Seemed like there wasn’t much hope for the rest of us if that was the case.

“Your Majesty?” said Rale over the hubbub, his greedy eyes on the king’s face. The whispers of the councilors died out as everyone followed his gaze.

“Perhaps it is time,” said the king, and the words seemed ripped from his throat. He looked up. “And the Tutor?”

“Must be stripped of her post, of course,” said Rale. “And must still be punished.”

“Banishment,” said the king quickly.

“Not practical,” said Rale. “Unless she is also to be blinded and have her hands removed. She must not be allowed to read or write again. I could take charge of her in the Temple of Aqil, sire.”

The look the king gave Rale then might have turned a less confident man to jelly. “As you point out, her knowledge must not be allowed to fall into other hands,” he said stiffly. “She will stay here in the palace, and she will be confined.”

“After her punishment, of course,” said Rale. “Should she not at least be maimed?” A smile played on his lips; he was just toying with the king now.

The king eyed Rale, and I saw that he did understand what was going on, even if the rows of incredulous councilors, most still looking shocked that Rale had stopped pushing for execution, did not. “Maiming is not necessary. Is not being stripped of her post and confined for the rest of her life enough?”

Rale frowned. “I am concerned, sire, that such a light punishment would not send the right message, either to the Tutors or to the other Arnathim.”

The king closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them his face was like stone. “She should be whipped then. One hundred lashes.”

A smile spread across Rale’s face. “A suitable punishment, sire. Whipped like a common slave. Ideal, as that is all she is.”

They held a vote then, on sending the raiders and on the Tutor’s sentence, but the result was certain as soon as Rale had voiced his support. Then the king called a break. It was a bit early for

the midday meal, but he looked like he couldn't get out of the room fast enough. The councilors milled about, chattering about the extraordinary events of the morning, but Rale summoned me through the crowd with an imperious gesture.

"Prepare to administer the punishment in thirty minutes, in the front courtyard," he said.

I blinked. "But, the king—"

"Will be grateful that I have seen to this unpleasant business for him. See that your men are assembled and the necessary equipment is there. And, Captain," he added, with a grim smile, "as ranking officer it would be most appropriate for you to administer the punishment personally."

I blinked. "Certainly," I said, because that was what he clearly wanted me to say.

But my mind spun back over his words as I hurried away to assemble the guards, and it wasn't until I was in the stable, selecting the best whip for the job, that I realized what he was about. Rale wanted me as deep in this as he was, to make sure there was no way I would squawk to the king if I had a fit of conscience. Because if my suspicion about the king's feelings for the girl was correct, he wouldn't listen to anything I said, once he'd found out I'd been the one to wield the whip.

I swore under my breath. Had Rale somehow sensed that my disgust for the king had been abating in past weeks? The thought made the back of my neck itch. Maybe he was granted powers by Aqil, like some of my greener men whispered.

But he wasn't as all-seeing as he thought he was, I thought grimly as I pulled a long reed-whip from the wall and cracked it experimentally. The king had never had my support, and certainly didn't now—I knew which side my bread was buttered on. If Rale thought me in danger of having a fit of conscience, well, then, he just didn't know me.

I tested the rawhide whip as well, but went with the reed one. The rawhide would take her down more quickly, certainly, but that wasn't what this punishment was about. Rale would want the girl awake and screaming for as long as possible. I curled my fingers around the handle, remembering the little reed-whip my mother had used on me as a child when I displeased her. This one would do the job.

I sent Rian to fetch ropes. With no time to erect a platform, I had to use what was available to me, and the columns at the front of the palace would do nicely to tie her up. I emptied out the mess hall and sent the men there to gather up the servants and slaves, then I patrolled in the courtyard to make sure the area before the columns was kept clear.

Rale emerged from the front doors just as luncheon bells rang, the rest of the councilors as his entourage. By that time most of the servants and slaves were already assembled, leaving the places at the front for the Scholars. Rale nodded approvingly when I showed him the column I planned to tie her to.

“Well done, Captain,” he said, as if I had performed some great feat, not merely found rope and a whip. My lip curled at his condescension.

I looked around at the crowd—even with the servant quarters and slave quarters emptied out, it was barely two hundred. It wasn’t like Rale not to make this more public—wasn’t his goal to humiliate the Tutor as thoroughly as possible? I watched him with narrowed eyes as he took his place at the front of the crowd, unnerved. What was his game this time? Rale never did anything without a reason.

Rian returned with the rope, and I handed him the whip and told him where to stand.

“Captain,” said Rale loudly, “bring out the prisoner.”

I looked around in surprise. “But the king hasn’t arrived yet.”

Rale smiled. “He’ll be along. Go get the prisoner so we may be done with this unpleasant business as quickly as possible.”

It rankled to take orders from Rale—in front of other people at least—but I caught the grim look on the western vizier’s face where he stood between Rale and his daughter, and it reminded me that I couldn’t afford to antagonize either of them. So I gave a little bow—aiming it more toward the two Gamos than toward Rale—and went inside.

Upstairs, Ots and Halder had taken posts at the top of the stairs, with Jad and Pritt outside the Tutor’s door. I told Ots and Halder to follow me, and ordered Jad and Pritt to remain to guard the other two Tutors. Jad looked disappointed—apparently rumors of the Tutor’s impending punishment had made their way up here already, and he wanted to see it firsthand. But I didn’t need him making coarse comments in front of the Scholars, disgracing the entire company.

I lifted my hand and knocked sharply on the door, then stopped myself. She was a prisoner now, not a Tutor, and so not even deserving of the respect of a knock. Irritated with myself, I opened the door, making my face a smooth guard’s mask. She’d broken the law, and I was to administer her punishment. I was justice, and justice did not show disgust or anger or anything at all.

She sat in an armchair, the older Tutor beside her. They looked as if they had been arguing. Her face was still streaked with tears, her eyes puffy, her hair an unkempt mess. She hadn't even bothered to fix the front of her dress.

She looked an utter slattern. That ought to please Rale.

"Come with me, Tutor," I said. Last time I'd have to give her that title, no doubt.

She didn't seem to have any idea what was coming. She stood and ran her hands down the front of dress. Didn't do any good. Then she looked beseechingly at the older Tutor, but that one just crossed her arms and looked away.

Now that was interesting. I'd have to report that to Rale. But then, the older one wasn't stupid, even if she was Arnath. She'd already had one of her pupils executed for treason. Wanted to distance herself from any whiff of lawbreaking on this one's part, no doubt.

I turned and left the room, allowing the force of my assumption that she would follow to make her do so. She was broken enough now, I knew. She wouldn't protest a thing that was done to her. That spark of defiance she'd had when she'd been stripped in the garden had gone out, maybe the moment she'd realized that the king didn't love her.

I almost laughed out loud as Ots and Halder fell in behind her. Women were so easily undone by love.

We reached the front doors, and I stood aside and gestured her through. As soon as she saw the people assembled below, she froze, so that I had to shove her forward and down the steps.

I stayed behind her, in case she got some idea about running, but that didn't seem likely with this one. Rale stepped forward and faced her, and that was when I realized that the king was still nowhere to be seen.

I frowned as Rale opened his mouth and stripped her of her title. The king should have been the one to do that, by law. Rale had taken many liberties, but this one, for some reason, surprised me. And the king should have been there to witness her punishment. Even if he had feelings for her—especially if he had feelings for her—he should have been there.

He was hiding, I realized with a wave of contempt. Gods, men could be undone by love too, could they not?

Rale was going to take the throne, I knew, but I could no longer find it in me to regret having anything to do with that. I looked over the faces in the crowd as Rale went on—that man

loved to hear himself talk—and my stomach contracted at the sight of Kirol in the second row. What was he doing here? He was supposed to be at the front gates all day, far away from this.

But of course—all the men on their way into the mess hall for the midday meal would have been stopped and sent out here as witnesses. All my machinations, undone by...mealtime. I didn't like the idea of Kirol watching me whip the girl. Which was ridiculous—he was a junior lieutenant. He'd seen slaves being punished before. And this one had broken the law, was lucky she wasn't having her hands chopped off or being burned alive. This was how the world worked.

But Kirol wasn't even looking my way. His eyes were on Rale, his forehead wrinkled in thought, and I thought of his suspicions about Rale that I'd brushed off. He was too perceptive, too honest to be a guard, I realized with despair. He'd be eaten alive here.

There was no time to think about that; Rale was finishing up his speech and looking at me expectantly. "Captain," he said in a ringing voice, "punish this slave as she deserves to be punished."

I nodded and grabbed the girl's arm, aware of Kirol's eyes on me even though I hadn't looked his way. Because of that, I didn't grip her as tightly as I could have or move her as harshly as I led her to the pillar.

"Hands," I said to Ots and Halder, and they dragged her forward and tied her wrists together.

I stepped back and took the whip that Rian handed me. As soon as Ots and Halder had stepped clear, I raised the whip. No need to draw this out. That was Rale's way, not mine.

The girl turned her head then, and saw the whip, and the knowledge of what was going to happen to her flashed in her eyes just before the first lash fell, slicing through the white and green dress.

She gasped—trying not to scream, no doubt. They all tried not to scream in the beginning. "One," said Rale behind me.

I lifted the whip again, and again it fell with whistle and a snap, ripping open another section of her dress. Still she was silent, as silent as the crowd watching behind me.

"Two," said Rale.

By the fifth lash, the back of her green and white dress had been sliced away, stripping her of the symbol of her post as surely as Rale had stripped her of her title. Blood dripped down over her pale buttocks and legs, but still she didn't do more than gasp and give a choked little cry.

The screaming didn't start until the eighth lash—she held out longer than most, though I was hardly in the mood to be impressed with her forbearance.

And after the fifteenth, the begging began. Again, later than most.

My arm was aching by the twentieth lash, and the satisfaction of seeing the former Tutor brought low was starting to wane. Having an up-close view of flesh being ripped apart would get to any man after a while.

Rale didn't seem bothered though—he just went on counting the strokes in a placid tone, and the courtyard remained utterly silent except for his voice, and the whistle and slash of the whip, and the pitiful screams of the Arnath girl.

I fell into a haze—it was like that, sometimes, with these long-lasting punishments—and my arm seemed to move up and down all by itself. The world narrowed to the sound of Rale's voice, and the relentless movement of the whip, and I was struck with the sudden sense that my arm was a thing outside my control, that it was responding to Rale of its own accord, that I was as much a slave to his will as any Arnath to any Qilarite.

Ridiculous, I thought, and tried to pause, to pull up on the whip for a moment, if only to prove to myself that I was still master of my own will.

“Fifty-five,” droned Rale.

But my arm, locked into the cycle of movement, would not stay, and the lash fell just as he wished. The girl was broken, sagging against the pillar now, only her bound hands holding her up, and what had once been individual screams to go with each lash had turned into a long, keening wail, only interrupted by the jerking of her body each time the whip bit into her skin.

“Fifty-six.”

“What is this?” roared a new voice.

The lash fell and the girl jerked and I moved my arm back for another, hardly registering Rale's oily tones as he answered the voice. He hadn't counted the next stroke, but my arm lifted anyway, unstoppable.

“STOP!” came a shout, and there was someone else there in front of the girl—the king. “I order you to stop this at once.”

His eyes blazed so fiercely that my arm did drop then—he looked ready to rip me apart with his bare hands if I didn't obey. I forced my fingers to uncurl, and the bloody whip fell to the stones.

But the king wasn't looking at me anymore—he was kneeling beside the girl, touching her cheek. "Raisa! Raisa, stay with me. I'm going to get you out of here." His tone was tender, panicked.

My eyes went to Rale, who had stepped back and was watching with a satisfied expression.

Ah, I thought hazily. He'd done all this to force the king's hand. The girl was his chief weakness, after all.

I frowned. But the king himself had suggested whipping—had he hoped to delay or avoid that punishment altogether?

He had, I realized, as I watched him demand a knife from Halder and cut the girl's bonds, then gather her gently in his arms. He'd agreed to the punishment to buy time, and he'd hoped to have her gone from here before Rale tried to go through with it.

All eyes followed the king as he hoisted the dead weight of the now-unconscious girl up the steps. A figure in a guard uniform raced down the steps to help him—Kirol.

My heart constricted. Why was Kirol up there? He ought to have been in his place in the second row...

My eyes went to Rale, who was watching my cousin and the king disappear through the front doors of the palace, a smug expression on his fat face. He'd known about Kirol's misgivings and his blasted honest nature, too, I realized. He'd played him, made sure that someone loyal to the king would let him know what was happening out here, so he'd come and interrupt it and give the whole country a reason to see Rale as a better option.

As soon as the king had gone, talk broke out in the courtyard, as if all speech had been held behind a dam that had suddenly broken. The courtyard was a flurry of movement and sound, with a few still points. Still dazed, I focused on those points: the western vizier, staring at the place where the king had disappeared, a repulsed expression on his face. Next to him, his daughter, her ordinarily haughty expression replaced with one so open and raw that it felt indecent to keep looking at it. So I looked away and saw the third still point: Rale, watching the court break like waves on the scandal of the king's actions, delight emanating from every pore.

I expected Rale to make some sort of pronouncement then—surely everyone did. But he only walked over to me and said, loud enough for my nearby men to hear, "I want the prisoner guarded continuously, wherever he takes her."

“He” was the king, I thought dully. Rale’s coup had already begun. The king would stay with her, that much was certain, and that meant Rale would treat him like a prisoner too.

I couldn’t bring myself to speak agreeable words to Rale, so I just nodded.

Rale’s eyes narrowed, as if he suspected my thoughts. But then he smiled. “Clean yourself up, Captain,” he said. “You’ve got Arnath blood all over you.”

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.