

Mati thought he knew who he was – until his closest friend chose to become a martyr for her people's freedom and made him question everything.

Warning: This story contains spoilers for *Sword and Verse*.

**Eyes Open: A Story from the World of *Sword and Verse*
by Kathy MacMillan**

I peeked around the edge of the corridor. It wasn't too late to turn back. I hadn't been seen yet, and no one would know that I had even been here.

But someone would know that I *hadn't* been here. And I would always wonder, if I didn't go through with this.

Down the corridor at the guard station, someone swore. I ducked behind a tapestry and shrank against the wall, pulling my black cloak up over my face, praying to Gytia the stealthy to hide me. Of course, given my reasons for being in the dungeons this morning, it didn't seem likely he would oblige.

But the night guard must have been ready for his bed, because he stumped past me without even a sideways glance. The lamps flickered in the stirred air of his passage, and I listened as his footfalls faded up the stairs.

Since it was Library cleaning day, I was betting that there would only be one guard on duty down here this early in the morning, and my guess proved right when I crept down the corridor and saw Kirol sitting at the guard station. Even better – not only was there just one guard, but it was the youngest and newest, promoted by his cousin the guard captain after three others had been banished the day before.

I let the cloak fall away from my face as I stepped up in front of Kirol and dropped a bag of coins on the table in front of him. It clanked in a satisfying way.

"Ten minutes alone with the prisoner," I said, my voice sounding much more commanding than I felt. I cleared my throat. "And another bag in three days if no one learns that I was here."

Kirol's eyes widened as he looked up at me. He wasn't that much older than I was, but he had an innocent set to his face that being a guard was sure to wipe off in a few weeks. I wondered what he saw when he looked at me. A dashing young Qilarite prince, full of authority? A joking, frivolous young man, as my father saw? Or a nervous, awkward, fifteen-year-old boy? That was certainly what I felt like.

Kirol was silent for a moment, and I had the impression that he was still processing my request. I waited.

At last he jumped up from his chair and swept the bag of gyots into his pocket. "Of course, Your High – of course." There were at least ten prisoners in the dark cells beyond, but he didn't ask which one I meant.

He picked up a lantern and led me down a narrow stone hallway. The floor under my feet was uneven. The flickering lamps on the walls gave dim illumination to the cell doors, the prisoners barely visible inside. I drew the hood of my cloak up to hide my face from the silent eyes that caught the light. Quiet sobbing came from a cell halfway down the corridor.

That must have been one of the conspirators. Surely the prisoners had been told what would happen to them tomorrow, when they would be led out onto a temple platform and –

I forced myself to stop the thought right there. I couldn't think that far ahead. I only had to make it down the corridor.

I went on, step after step, the sobs fading behind me as I realized how quiet the other prisoners were. Did they not realize what was coming? Or did they not care?

And then I was standing in front of the last cell, Kirol hovering beside me with the lantern.

Tyasha ke Demit sat on the thin mattress of a narrow wooden bed. She raised one hand against the light.

"I said alone," I reminded Kirol. He hesitated a moment before handing me the lantern and retreating down the corridor.

I hung the lantern on the hook by the door, taking my time before meeting Tyasha's eyes.

"Mati," she said cheerfully, "have you come to let me out?" Her tone was just as light and teasing as it had been a thousand times in the Adytum. I stared at her smudged face and dirty white dress, its green sash ripped. Her black hair hung in a ratty braid over one shoulder. Had the braid been her idea, or pressed upon her by the Resistance?

Had the rest of it been her idea, or theirs?

My throat tightened. I was supposed to be angry. That was what Father would say. But I only felt sad, and bewildered.

I swallowed, unable for the first time to match Tyasha's tone. "You know I can't do that."

"No matter. What has to be has to be." She sighed. "Poor Mati. You have no idea what's happening, do you?"

I hit the bars with the palm of my hand. She didn't even flinch. "Of course I know what's happening. You're going to be executed! Though you don't seem too bothered by that fact."

She shook her head slowly. "It's more than that, though." She rose slowly and approached the door, and I fought the urge to step backward. Where had that come from? It was only Tyasha, whom I had known my whole life.

Or at least, I'd thought I had.

She leaned toward me, and I caught a glimpse of the mad light in her eyes. "The Resistance is stronger than your father thinks, Mati," she whispered. "And this won't stop it. As long as the Arnathim are enslaved, it will be there. Killing me, killing them –" She swept her hand out to the right, indicating the other cells, and I wondered if the others could hear us. "None of that will kill the Resistance. Keeping the language of the gods from them only makes them want it more."

I shook my head. She wasn't making any sense. "Why did you do it, Tya?" I said softly.

She stared at me. "You really don't understand, do you? I did it because my people have been enslaved here for hundreds of years, and it needs to end. It's as simple as that. No one deserves to die in ignorance, without dignity, without *humanity*." She had gripped the bars of the door as she had spoken, and now she released them and sighed. "Oh, Mati, I wish for your sake things were different."

"For *my* sake?" I exploded – but in a whisper. I didn't especially like the idea of the other prisoners hearing our conversation.

Tyasha nodded. “Yes. Because you’re going to be king one day, and by then it will be worse. If the Resistance hasn’t destroyed the whole city by then, of course. Because they will, Mati. Your father can crush them all he likes, but the Resistance will not go away. Do you know why?”

I shook my head.

“Because the Arnathim are *people*, Mati. Every Arnath has ideas and hopes and plans and likes and dislikes, just like you. Most Qilarites are too cowardly to see that.” For a moment the madness in her expression abated, and I felt I was looking at the old Tyasha. “But *you* might, if you look. You have that in you, I think. Which is why you’ll be a better king than your father ever could, but it will be harder on you to do it.”

Her words swirled in my head, not making any sense. My father always said I was too soft, too carefree, that I needed to behave with a seriousness more befitting my station. That I needed to develop the hardness he had.

And I supposed he was right. After all, here I was, visiting the traitorous Tutor condemned to die. No matter that I had studied beside her since I was four, that she was like an older sister to me. If my father found out I had come here, he’d skin me alive.

“Poor Mati,” she said again. Her pity was becoming annoying, rather than just confusing. I opened my mouth to tell her so, but she spoke first. “No one else in this place is as trusting as you, though you hide it well.” She pursed her lips. “A little gift for you, to use when you need it. I had another visitor this morning. And that one *did* try to let me out.” She grinned.

I gaped at her. “What? Who would do that?”

Tyasha gripped the bars and leaned in closer. “Laiyonea,” she whispered, her voice barely above a breath. “I wouldn’t let her, though. The Arnathim need to rally to us. My death will do that.” She spoke so casually of her death, but what really chilled my blood was the natural way she referred to the Resistance as “us”. How long had she been doing their bidding, while she had sat in the courtyard and scrawled the language of the gods? I didn’t want to know.

“Laiyonea?” I repeated softly, my mind reeling at the thought. Stern, hard-faced Laiyonea, my father’s closest advisor, and friend too, though he would never apply the word to an Arnath.

Tyasha laughed, the sound edged with bitterness. “Oh yes, our good Tutor has been keeping her own secrets, it seems.” She looked straight at me. “She told me that I’m her daughter.”

I gaped at her, sure that I had heard her wrong. “Her - what?” I finally managed to get out.

“Seems she had some indiscretion with a Scholar from the south, oh, about twenty-two years ago, and the result was me.” Tyasha giggled, sounding quite unhinged.

My mind raced. “Does my father know?” I tried to imagine my harsh, unyielding father allowing a Tutor to remain who had done such a thing, and failed.

“He knew she was pregnant – he helped her hide it. Before he was king, obviously.” We both knew my father had gotten worse once he had taken the throne. “They said she was ill, and she went to stay in one of the houses in the Valley of Qora until I was born. Then I was to be taken out and left on the mountain, but she convinced one of the slave women to take me. Your father thinks the baby died on the mountain, but Laiyonea found me and set it all up for me to be selected as Tutor.” She giggled. “And I never knew, until this morning, that she was my mother.”

“But,” I said, trying to organize what she was telling me into a story that made sense, “the Tutors are chosen by the oracle.”

She gave me a look. “But the Tutor *reads* the oracle, Mati. And your father trusted her. Still does, I guess.”

I frowned. “Why are you telling me this?” I was annoyed at her, but I didn’t know why.

Tyasha sighed. “Because it’s useful information, and maybe you can use it one day.” She paused. “And maybe because I didn’t want to die without someone knowing the truth. And because I care about you.” She flicked my hand, still wrapped around the bars. “Even if you *are* Qilarite.”

Down the hall, Kirol cleared his throat loudly. I had to go. My throat closed up. Tyasha looked back at me, sympathetic, but not regretful. I couldn’t make sense of her attitude. She wasn’t the Tyasha I knew, and yet she was, in so many ways. Impulsive, opinionated, passionate...only I never imagined that those traits would lead her here.

“Go,” she said. “There’s nothing you can do about what will happen to me. Only...do me one favor. When it comes time, don’t watch. You don’t need to see that.”

My voice wouldn’t work, so I nodded.

“Goodbye, Mati,” Tyasha said simply, then she went back to the bed and sat down.

“Goodbye, Tya,” I whispered, feeling very young, much younger than she was, as I lifted the lantern and returned to the guard station.

I placed the lantern on the table in front of Kirol. “No one,” I reminded him.

He nodded. “You can count on my discretion, Your Highness.”

“And here,” I said, handing him the cloak. I wouldn’t need it anymore, and I’d look suspicious walking around with it in the palace.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” he said, running one hand over the fabric.

I turned and made my way up the corridor, slipping down a side passage that led to the Scribe’s Room, winding around to the main corridor that way. If anyone saw me I could just claim to be visiting the Trade Minister or asking the Emtirian Ambassador about my afternoon lesson.

I passed a few scribes, but everyone was distracted today. News of Tyasha’s treason had spread through the city since the day before, and it was all the Scholars had been able to talk about. Most of the scribes barely registered my presence. My father would have been appalled at the lack of decorum, but it suited me just fine.

My conversation with Tyasha replayed itself in my mind as I hurried up the steps and along the front hall of the palace, heading for the gardens and a quiet spot to think. Three guards were coming toward me from the direction of the Library; I didn’t realize until they knelt – directly in my path – that two of them held another, smaller figure between them.

I frowned, snapping back to the present in an instant. The girl kneeling between the two guards wore a faded green dress, and her face was streaked with dirt. She looked terrified.

I looked to Peron, who knelt a little in front of the other three. “What’s this?”

Peron cleared his throat. “This slave has committed an act of treason, Your Highness. She is being taken to Captain Dimmin now.”

I looked more closely at the girl. Was Tyasha right? Was the Resistance everywhere?

The girl cringed away from the guards, staring at the floor. She seemed so fragile. “What has she done?” I asked.

“She removed a letter from its place in the Library of the Gods, Your Highness,” Peron replied quickly.

The girl’s brown eyes flashed up to mine, and then away. She reminded me of Tyasha, though I couldn’t say how. They looked nothing alike – this girl was obviously Arnath, with fair skin and reddish brown hair in a tangled mass down her back. Tyasha could have passed for Qilarite, with her straight black hair and olive skin. I stared at the girl, but addressed my question to Peron, my voice hardening as I pushed the emotion of the past hour out of it. “How do you know this?” I said.

One of the other guards answered me. “I saw it, Your Highness. She took the letter as she was cleaning the statue of Suna.”

The girl made a sound of quiet protest, as though she couldn’t keep it in. As I turned to her, I worked to keep my expression as dispassionate as my father’s face had been when he pronounced Tyasha’s sentence. “Is this true?” I asked her.

She drew into herself, and shook her head. “It...it was an accident,” she whispered. “I brushed against the letter and it fell out.”

I should let the guards take her to Dimmin, I knew, but I also knew that if I did that, she would likely be executed. Perhaps a week ago such an accident would have been believed, but now...

Then she looked up and met my gaze, her expression not pleading but firm, as though it was *I* who had done wrong by doubting *her*. Tyasha’s words flitted through my mind: “*Every Arnath has ideas and hopes and plans and likes and dislikes, just like you. Most Qilarites never see that...But you might, if you look. You have that in you, I think.*”

What were this girl’s hopes and dreams? How had she ended up here? It wasn’t a question I had ever considered before, and as I looked at her, I found myself noticing more and more about her, like the way she held her head up, and how her fingers were clenched into fists. She was terrified, but she was doing her best to maintain some dignity.

Perhaps my father was right – perhaps I was too soft. But I believed her that it had been an accident, whatever had happened, and even if it hadn’t, she didn’t deserve to die over it.

I turned to Peron. “It seems to me that troubling my father with such a trivial matter would only annoy him, given the current situation. Let her go.”

“Your Highness?”

I studied my fingernails, feigning nonchalance. My heart beat hard though – if they didn’t obey me, and my father found out about this, he wouldn’t be happy. “Unless you’d prefer to irritate the king,” I said airily.

The three guards exchanged a look. As I’d intended, my words had reminded them of the guards banished yesterday, all of whom had been assigned to Tyasha and had failed to keep her from treasonous deeds.

Peron cleared his throat. “No, Your Highness.”

“Good,” I said. “I will apprise Captain Dimmin of the situation personally, so you needn’t worry about that. Let her go.” I had no intention of telling Dimmin a thing – he was far too interested in gaining my father’s favor – but that wasn’t important. They just had to *believe* that I would.

“Er...Your Highness,” said Peron, almost timidly. I bit back a smile. I hadn’t often played this sort of game, and it was a heady thing, to find how well I could do it when I tried. I

adopted an expression I had seen on my father's face, that of a benevolent ruler indulging a pleading supplicant.

"The letter that she...that is, the letter is still on the floor of the Library." Peron looked away as if he had said something rude.

I nodded. Of course – none of them could touch the letter. But I could. I wasn't actually supposed to go into the Library without my father's permission, but they didn't need to know that.

I led the way back to the Library. When I stepped inside, the hushed whispers of the slave children fell silent, and a row of round eyes peered over the cleaning platforms. The rest of the guards were clustered at the base of the cleaning platforms, and they all bowed as I entered. I hoped Peron would tell them enough about what happened that they would know to keep their mouths shut.

I saw the letter lying half-unrolled beside Suna's statue, an abandoned rag a few feet away, and I knelt to pick it up. The Arnath girl, still held loosely by the two guards, watched me closely.

On impulse, I stood and held the letter out to her. "Do you see what it says?" I asked.

She averted her eyes, and I felt stupid. Of course she could see it, but she couldn't *read* it. Still, at least I knew now that I hadn't been thickheaded and softhearted to believe in her innocence. She obviously had no idea what the symbols said.

I turned the letter around and read it silently. It was a long plea by an ancient king for relief from his bowel troubles, and I smiled. Not only was it written in the language of the gods, it was composed entirely of higher order symbols that even a Scholar wouldn't have been able to read. If this girl *had* been trying to steal letters from the Library of the Gods, there was very little she could have done with this one. I half-wanted to tell her so. I wondered if she would find it as amusing as I did.

I laughed softly as I rerolled the letter and tucked it back into its slot. I looked around the Library, taking in the tiny children on the platform, and I frowned as I looked at the girl again.

"How old are you?" I asked. Surely she was nearly as young as they were, but she seemed older, somehow. The curves at the front of her dress said so, at any rate.

"Fourteen, Your Highness," she whispered. She still seemed terrified. I frowned, not liking the idea of her being frightened of me.

I raised my eyebrows. "A little old for Library duty, isn't she?" I said to Peron.

"Mistress Kret is responsible for the children, Your Highness. I would be happy to tell her you said so," said Peron. He seemed relieved to have someone else to blame, and obviously wanted nothing to do with the girl or any of the other children.

I glanced at the tiny blonde girl perched on the highest platform and winced. I'd known about the platforms used to clean the high places in the palace, but I had never seen them in action before. I didn't fully understand the hot swirl of discomfort in my gut, but I knew that Tyasha's words in the dungeon had opened something in me that I'd tried to keep closed for a long time.

It wasn't the guard's fault; he was just trying to keep his job. Nevertheless I snapped at him. "I rather think that it's Laiyonea ke Tirit you ought to be informing. Or have you forgotten that a new Tutor-in-training is to be selected?"

Peron looked as if I'd slapped him. "No, Your Highness, I – I'm sorry, it will –"

The Arnath girl, too, was staring, and something knowing in her eyes unnerved me. I wouldn't be able to hold on to my act much longer, so I waved off the guard's babbling and said, "Take care of it," before I exited the Library with as much dignity as I could muster.

At least no one else would die needlessly tomorrow.

That was the thought in my mind when I stumbled into the garden and found Laiyonea sitting on my favorite secluded bench. I tried to duck away before she saw me – I wouldn't be ready to face her until I had thought a lot more about what Tyasha had told me.

Laiyonea didn't know this, however, and she called out to me. I had no choice but to turn back and sit beside her. Her eyes looked sad, now that I knew to look for the emotion there.

I realized then that I could learn a lot more than just the language of the gods from Laiyonea. Perhaps she could teach me how to hide the soft parts of me that my father hated, how to take those things and shove them below the surface, to show the world only what I wanted it to see. And she could teach me all those things without even knowing I was learning them.

Lesson one began immediately. "Your studies will recommence in three days," she said coolly, betraying no hint that her own daughter waited in the darkness below for her execution, or that she herself had tried to free her only hours before. I looked carefully at her face. Not even a twitch betrayed her feelings.

I nodded. If there was anyone I could have spoken to about Tyasha, it should have been Laiyonea. After all, she had taught the two of us together in the courtyard for the past eleven years. She had seen how close we were. And she knew me perhaps better than anyone, with all my lazy, frivolous, softhearted tendencies. But she also knew my father and his complaints, and so she understood when I answered her as though I felt nothing. "I imagine you will be busy helping Father."

Laiyonea clasped her hands in her lap. "Yes, and searching out girls of the right age for the Selection. It will take place after the execution." If I hadn't known what I knew, I might not have caught the slight hesitation before the word "execution". I tried to imagine Laiyonea's face when Tyasha had turned down her offer to help her escape, and almost laughed at the absurdity of it.

But hearing her talk about the Selection made it all even more horrible. I couldn't fathom the idea of sitting in the courtyard next to someone who was not Tyasha. Despite all that had happened that morning, the full weight of grief did not hit me until that moment. I curled my fingers around the edge of the bench.

"There's a girl among the palace slave children who is fourteen," I blurted out, before I thought of a better way to phrase it. And then, because I had said this much, I had to tell Laiyonea the whole story about the girl and the accident with the letter. Her frown grew deeper as she listened, and my cool mask of composure slipped.

"You won't tell Father, will you?" I asked nervously. "If he found out, he wouldn't like it." That was putting it very, very mildly, but Laiyonea only shook her head.

"No, I won't tell Tyno," she said. "But it was foolish of you to get tangled up in it, Mati. You should have let them take her to Captain Dimmin and stayed out of it." I nearly protested – for her to tell me that I was being foolish, after the things she had done! – but I held my tongue, remembering what Tyasha had said. A *gift*, she had called the information she had given me, and she was right. Perhaps a time would come when I would need to ask for Laiyonea's help, and I might need it. Keeping silent for now was what Laiyonea would have done, and so I considered that lesson number two.

The next day I attended Tyasha ke Demit's execution. I sat right beside my father in the front row, as they burned her with the branding rods, shaped with the symbols of the gods, and removed her hands and feet, and left her to die slowly on the platform. Despite my promise to her, I did not look away, for I had made a new promise to myself: to watch, to see with clear eyes what my father and my people were capable of, and to hide the soft parts of me away where no one could touch them.