

What if your greatest desire and your greatest fear lead you down the same path?

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

As soon as we returned from Tyasha ke Demit's execution, the head servant locked me and the other children in the palace slave quarters. I immediately fell onto the narrow pallet I shared with Linti, exhausted and sweaty; we'd been standing out in the sun for hours, and the only thing I'd eaten in two days was the bit of cheese Linti had sneaked to me the night before. After the incident in the Library yesterday, Emilana had denied me supper and made me spend the night in the Stander, and had conveniently forgotten to release me from it until after breakfast. She'd put me right next to her at the execution, too, so she could pinch me each time I swayed on my feet or my stomach growled.

My skin was clammy; I pushed myself sideways to lay my cheek on the cool stone floor. Kiti brought me a dipper of water; most of it dribbled down my chin but it felt good wherever it contacted my overheated skin.

I protested when he brought a second. "Let the others have some," I mumbled. "Linti first."

"After this," he said firmly, and held the dipper to my lips.

It was easier to drink than to argue with him. I'd been awake too long, as I hadn't been able to do more than nod against the wall for a few minutes in the Stander before I had to move my feet again, to ward off the crawly things in the dark. But I resolved to have a talk with Kiti when I could think straight; he'd been too quiet ever since that business with the guards in the Library yesterday. He'd always taken it hard when one of us was punished, and once I had even had to stomp on his foot to keep him from protesting when Emilana had slapped Naka. But he was going to be oldest soon; even the prince had commented on the fact that I was too old to be here. I had to prepare Kiti to keep the others in line, for their own safety, before I was sent away to a temple.

There were other preparations I had to make too, but I would think about them when I woke up.

I made myself assume that I was going to a temple. I didn't allow myself to consider the other possibility, even though the prince had implied it yesterday. But it had been winding through my thoughts all night in the darkness, even in the hazy day as I watched Tyasha ke Demit dying with the symbols of the language of the gods branded all over her. That sight should have made me long for the temples, should have made me dread the guard's voice addressing Emilana Kret on the other side of the door.

But as soon as I heard it, my clouded mind cleared with the force of a gale. I sat up, making Kiti spill the water down his front. "Move," I hissed. I pushed both him and Linti, who'd been hovering behind him, out of the way and lunged at the crumbling stone in the corner.

I vaguely heard them asking what I was doing, but all my attention was focused on my fingers digging through powdery stone. I found the edge of the rag wrapped around my heart-verse, and yanked it without regard for the dust that showered the corner.

Linti tugged at my arm. "They're talking about you," she said.

"I know!" I snapped. I couldn't have said whether it was dread or hope that put the edge in my tone.

I shook off the dust and managed to shove the roll down the front of my dress just as Emilana unlocked the door. It settled sideways between my dress and my shift, held in place by the tie around my waist. Quickly I plucked at my clothes to pull the sweaty shift away from my skin and make the dress billow out more, hiding the shape of the bundle at my waist.

Kiti was watching me curiously, but Linti's lip was trembling; I'd never snapped at her like that before. And once Emilana announced that the guards had come to take me away, Linti threw her arms around me and sobbed in earnest.

"Don't cry, Linti, please don't cry," I whispered. Emilana was in a bad enough temper already with all the events of the day, and she rarely needed an excuse to take it out on us.

"Come. Now," Emilana ordered.

I squeezed Linti's shoulders. "Remember the place under the stairs. Keep checking it," I whispered as Emilana pulled me away from her. Linti sniffled and nodded; I'd been telling her stories about that place under the stairs for years. Sometimes it was a doorway to a magical world, one that looked like the island where I'd lived as a child, where children spent the day playing on the beach instead of balancing on terrifying platforms. Sometimes it was where spirits left treats for children who were good. I'd often left little things I had filched there for Linti to find – a pretty bead that had fallen off of some Scholar woman's hairstyle and been swept into a corner, or a bit of bread I had saved from lunch.

My heart wrenched in my chest as Emilana pulled me from the room; I had no idea if I would be able to keep doing those things, and if nothing ever appeared in the hiding place again, would that be worse than if Linti had never found anything there at all?

But I couldn't spend any more time worrying about Linti; Emilana shoved me toward the two guards waiting in the hallway. One of them had been in the Library yesterday, and he looked nervous. But I guessed the other one hadn't been told about what had happened, because he just jerked his head toward the back of the palace and led the way down the corridor.

I followed, keeping my head down and fighting the wave of hope rising in my chest. Surely if I was being taken to the temples, they would have led me out the front of the palace. I'd overheard enough of Emilana's complaining earlier today to know that the Selection of the new Tutor-in-training would happen here, in the palace.

I shouldn't have been so elated when the guards led me out onto the beach, and I saw ten or eleven other girls about my age. All wore green as I did. The moment the guards pushed me into the group, a brisk servant I didn't recognize ordered us into the bathhouse and told us to strip and bathe.

I used the confusion of a dozen girls entering the pool to stash my shift, with my heart-verse rolled up inside, far under a bench. Even though the servant woman slapped me for being the last to enter the pool, I was glad I had taken the time when I heard her order another servant to gather up all of our clothes and burn them. I watched the second servant out of the corner of my eye, but she was in far too much of a hurry to check under the benches, and my bundled-up shift remained hidden in the shadows.

When we emerged from the bath – I was careful to be neither first nor last, to be less noticeable – the servant handed us new shifts and clean white gowns to wear. The fabric was softer than anything I had ever felt. I drifted closer to the bench where I had hidden my heart-verse as I wriggled into the dress, wondering how I would retrieve my bundle with so many people around.

The risk I'd taken yesterday in the Library, touching that letter, was nothing compared to what I was doing now, contemplating how to carry my father's secret message with me into the

Selection ceremony. But I couldn't leave it behind. And I had managed to smuggle it all the way here from the Nath Tarin, had hidden it in my clothes on the ship and in the slave pens, and no one had ever suspected anything before. As long as I kept my head down and did everything they said, no one ever suspected.

One of the other girls, who had dark hair that hung in wet ropes past her shoulders, eyed me as she tied the sash of her white dress. I didn't like her expression; she kept glancing at the bench with her eyebrows furrowed.

One of the younger girls made a fuss then about needing help with her buttons, and the dark-haired girl volunteered to help her. She was obviously trying to ingratiate herself with the servant, which irritated me for reasons I couldn't identify, but I seized the opportunity to whip my heart-verse out of my dirty, sweaty old shift under the pretense of fixing the hem of my dress. I shoved it down my front as I had before, but the waist of the new gown was fitted, and the bundle made peaks at either side of my dress. Quickly I folded my arms across my waist, wrapping one hand around the other elbow, and decided to claim stomach pains if anyone questioned it.

I didn't actually have to fake them; though I'd hardly eaten anything for two days and should have been famished, I thought that I might vomit if I ate anything now. If they fed us, what would I do? I couldn't let myself be removed from the Selection.

As it turned out, there was no danger of us being fed. We were led out onto the beach and told to dry our hair in the sun, and sit quietly until called into the palace.

The dark-haired girl, though, was talking to the others. They seemed to know her. I gathered that one of the girls had asked why we were wearing white, when the law said slaves had to wear green, because the dark-haired girl said, "The one who is chosen will get a green sash. The others go back to wherever they came from." She frowned and rubbed at her arm, which I saw now was pocked with round scars. She noticed me looking and drew down the sleeve of her gown. "Candlemaker's shop," she said. "*I am not going back.*"

The way she said it, so simply, so confidently, made me feel childish, though I guessed the girl was at least a year younger than I was.

"How will they choose?" said a younger girl with ragged brown hair.

"Some kind of test, I think. I don't know exactly." The dark-haired girl chattered on, as though to get quickly past the fact that there was something she didn't know. "Tutors are usually much younger of course – the last one was chosen when she was five years old, before the prince was even born. And she was old for it – most Tutors are only two or three in the Selection. So whoever they choose this time will have to learn fast, to be ready to teach Prince Mati's son when he has one." She leaned back on her hands in the sand, her shoulders erect, and my heart deflated a little. There was no way that anyone would choose me once they saw her confidence.

But if it was a test...my father had taught me a little writing before the raiders had come. Maybe that would help me now. I hugged myself tighter, pressing the edges of my heart-verse into my skin, and tried to suppress the wave of dangerous hope in my chest.

The servants came around then, giving us each a cup. I, like the others, drank eagerly, not realizing until I had drained the cup that the wine was bitter and strong, unmixed with water. I blinked at the ocean, the waves shimmering in and out of focus.

We were herded into a haphazard line then. I don't remember entering the palace, but suddenly we were in the corridor outside the banquet chamber. I kept one arm across my waist and held the wall for support with the other, though my head felt steadier here inside the familiar cool stone walls.

The others, however, seemed not to share in my comfort. One fair-haired girl was giggling uncontrollably, and the dark-haired girl whispered furiously to herself in front of me.

When we were led into the council chamber, all of us fell silent. The entire Council was there, with the king in his raised seat at the center of the semicircle, the Scholar nobility seated around the room, expressions grim and disinterested. Stone goblets stood in wide rows throughout the center of the room. The patterns of the room – perfect semicircle of councilors, perfect rows of goblets – were so precise that it seemed a shame when the servants led us into the room, each girl to kneel before a goblet, and wrecked the perfect symmetry.

As I knelt, I slid the bundle inside my dress to a diagonal position, so it wouldn't poke out. It brushed uncomfortably up against my left breast, but I forced myself to stay still and bear it.

Laiyonea ke Tirit, the Prince's Tutor, rose from a low seat at the king's feet – I had not even seen her there until she stood – and told us to drink. I lifted the goblet, and at first my tongue rejoiced at the clear, clean taste of water, but then I realized that the liquid was in fact something stronger than wine, something that seemed to flow immediately into my veins and set them on fire. When I set the cup back down, the room around me seemed fuzzy, all except for Laiyonea, who stood out as sharply as if she stood before the rising sun, her white gown radiant, its green sash glowing.

Laiyonea moved among us, leaving paper and quills and ink bottles in her wake. I trailed my fingers over the paper; it was rough, its surface textured like palm leaves, not dry and brittle like the paper in the Library had been, not smooth and soft like my father's paper either. How many different kinds of paper could there be in the world? I unstopped the bottle and smelled the ink inside; its scent seemed bitter, but perhaps that was the wine lingering on my tongue.

Laiyonea's voice cut through the room then. "Open the bottles," she said, and I set mine down quickly. Laiyonea's eyes moved over all the girls, though, and did not rest on me, so I bent my head and listened as she explained what to do. She would hold up a large paper with a symbol, and we were to copy it as best we could. At her signal, I lifted the quill, clutching it in my fist uncomfortably.

The first symbol was easy, with a straight line and three short lines crossing it. I dipped the quill carefully and swiped the lines over the paper. *Da*, a faraway voice seemed to whisper to me, swishing like the wind outside our cottage as my father showed me symbols in the dirt floor.

The second symbol was harder, with layers of lines that arched like a rainbow. I found a more comfortable way to hold the quill, then moved it across the paper, enjoying the flow of ink from its tip. I underestimated the amount of ink needed and had to dip again, then left a splotch on the paper. Frowning, I started over, almost missing the third symbol.

On and on they went, curving lines and straight, rounded shapes and points and crosses, none of them comprehensible but all whispering of secret, forgotten knowledge. I worked as one in a trance, the king and Scholars Council forgotten, nothing in focus but Laiyonea and her papers and the smooth tiles beneath my folded legs and the rough paper filling with symbols before me and the quill twitching in my ink-stained fingers and my heart-verse poking me inside my dress.

I did not even realize, until someone took the quill from my fingers, that only three girls remained in the room. Had Laiyonea dismissed the others as we had worked, weeded out candidates as the symbols became more and more complex? Or had the other girls fainted, succumbing to the strange liquor? The dark-haired girl who'd seemed so confident knelt to my left, and another girl, light brown curls bouncing around her shoulders, knelt on her other side.

The dark-haired girl's pale skin was faintly green, but her eyes were focused on Laiyonea and her fingers were clenched in her lap. The other girl stared at her hands stupidly, as if wondering where all the black stains had come from.

"Three remain, Your Majesty," said Laiyonea softly. "The gods shall decide it now."

A man seated to the right of the king rose and stepped before the basin under the king's seat. I knew him – he was the High Priest of Aqil. He'd presided over Tyasha ke Demit's execution just that morning. He lifted something from the basin and held it up to the king, who nodded. I squinted to see what it was – a bone. The priest handed it to Laiyonea, who took a knife from the table and carved something on the bone.

When she had finished, she passed the bone to the king, who looked it over and nodded, then passed it back. The priest moved his hands in the stone basin; from where I knelt, I could not see what he was doing, but a moment later, flame leapt up from the basin, crackling loudly in the silent room.

The priest bent and fed something to the fire. When the flames rose higher and the long-ago familiar stench of burning paper filled the room, I realized that it was the papers upon which we had all copied Laiyonea's symbols. I blinked back tears as the smoke wafted into my eyes.

Beside me, the dark-haired girl was rocking back and forth, her lips moving silently as she stared at the flame. Praying, I thought dimly. Yes, I should be doing that too. But my swirling brain couldn't even come up with the names of the gods or the invocations we recited in the evening. There was a chanting cadence in my mind, but I didn't know where it had come from: *Light of wisdom, bold, brave, bright, bless us all and what we write...*

Ice seemed to pour through my veins as I realized what those words must be: some long-forgotten prayer to Sotia from the Nath Tarin. Thinking about Sotia wouldn't help me here; it might even anger the other gods. I forced my eyes wide open and stared at Laiyonea ke Tirit, who now stood holding the bone over the flame, unmoving, her face lit from below, the fire throwing her features into sharp relief, the black tendrils of hair that had escaped from her bun dancing in the borrowed wind of the flame. My fingers itched to touch my heart-verse through the fabric of my dress, but I forced them to stay twined together in my lap. I groped for the names of the gods in my mind, but all I found was *please, please, please, please*.

At last a soft popping sound broke the silence, and Laiyonea lifted the bone to scrutinize it. Her eyes swept over the three of us, and then she turned to the king. "The choice is made," she said quietly, and her words were a question, which he answered with a nod. She dropped the bone into the fire. It turned black as the flames licked along its sides.

Someone was behind me, pulling me to my feet, and I stumbled as my stiff knees straightened. The other girls had risen as well, and Laiyonea stood before us, something green in her hands. All eyes in the room followed her as she came to stand before me.

I might have vomited, then, had there been anything in my stomach. As it was, I clutched the front of my dress – and my heart-verse – as Laiyonea tied the sash around my waist. The dark-haired girl's crestfallen expression gave way to black hate as she stared at me. My vision blurred and blackened; I was hardly aware of being led to an upstairs room and left to sleep, but I forced myself to stay awake long enough to shove my heart-verse under the mattress before I passed out.

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I spent much of the next Shining and Veiling confused; suddenly everyone in the palace treated me with respect. I had a bed all to myself - I found it difficult to sleep, those first few nights, without Linti's knee in my back. Instead of sharing a pot of fish stew or porridge with the other slave children, I now ate at a private table with Laiyonea in our sitting room. That sitting room and the two adjoining bedrooms beyond it were the Tutor Suite, set aside for our use.

Within a day my feet hurt from wearing shoes.

My new clothes were all a bit big for me - they had been Tyasha's - but Laiyonea assured me that one of the servants would alter them to fit me. They were oddly soft against my skin, and so light that I often had to run my hand over the fabric to remind myself that I was actually wearing garments. They'd alter the dresses just like they'd altered me, changing me from one kind of slave into another. They could never know just how much of me was still my father's daughter. I'd keep that part hidden just like my heart-verse.

Two days after the Selection, Laiyonea took me to the Adytum, the sacred courtyard that only monarchs, heirs, and Tutors were permitted to enter. I had seen its high stone walls from the beach below, of course, but I shivered the first time I passed through the gate and mounted the steps to stand in the shadow of Gytia's face staring out at the sea. Two long wooden tables with benches stood under canopies, with a high chest of writing tools between them. At the far end, near the sea-facing wall, a waist-high stone pillar supported a wide firepit. The place was awash with the sound of the sea below and the cooing of the asotis perched at the far end.

Then Laiyonea sat me down and showed me the implements of our trade - the square reed paper on which I would write, the diluted lantana ink, the delicately honed asoti feather quills, cut by Laiyonea's own hand. Finally she showed me the rolls of yellowish white paper, the kind used by the king and prince, which would hold their words to the gods for years beyond count.

I was nervous as Laiyonea showed me how to position the quill in my hand, but it was nothing to what I felt when the gate creaked below and the prince appeared. His white linen tunic was bright against his bronze skin, his dark, straight hair ruffled as though he couldn't be bothered to keep it tidy.

I dropped to my knees, but Laiyonea frowned and pulled me to my feet. "Not here, Raisa. Here you are both students. You will teach Mati's son one day, and so you must be his equal here."

The prince looked at me for a long moment, his face expressionless. I recalled the things the servants said when they thought we children weren't listening, about how Prince Mati and Tyasha had been as close as siblings. The prince been kind to me that day in the Library - had probably saved my life - but I had the sense, in that moment, that he hated me for taking Tyasha's place.

Then he gave a small smile, and somehow, that was worse, but I couldn't have said why. "She'll have to be a fast learner for that," he said lightly.

I wasn't sure how to behave. I hadn't realized before how much the deference paid to royalty was a protection for people like me, to prevent us from having to actually interact with them.

But I couldn't avoid it that day. I sat down awkwardly beside the prince as Laiyonea ordered, and tried to follow her explanations of symbols and quills and line order.

Eventually, Laiyonea had Prince Mati practice by showing me the first set of symbols, and I did my best to copy them. We worked steadily, the silence interrupted only by Laiyonea correcting the order of my lines or telling me to redo a symbol. By luncheon bells, my eyes were nearly crossed with the effort of looking at so many symbols. Before Laiyonea would let me

leave the Adytum, she insisted that I correctly name each of the symbols I had written that morning. Each time I got one wrong, Laiyonea made me write it twenty more times.

My fingers were cramped and stained with ink when I reached the last line of symbols. I pointed at the first in the row and searched my mind. I could not remember its meaning.

"Well?" said Laiyonea.

I stared at it, willing myself to remember, but my brain was overflowing.

Then, to my shock, the prince touched my leg under the table. I glanced sideways at him.

"Safe," he mouthed.

I hesitated. Prince Mati had been kind to me that morning, but still, he was Qilarite and I was Arnath. Why would he help me? Then I remembered his face in the corridor when he had told the guards to let me go. He had met my eyes, and believed me.

"It means safe," I said.

"Very good," Laiyonea said. "And the next?"

I sped through the last line, my mind suddenly clear. I felt Prince Mati's eyes on me, watching as if ready to provide any answer I could not, and a peculiar sensation developed in the pit of my stomach.

When the lesson was finally over, Laiyonea took us to the firepit. I had filled nine sheets of reed paper front and back with symbols, and I had to stifle a cry as Laiyonea threw them onto the fire and I watched the last four hours of hard work disappear into smoke. I knew the law - anything written by the Tutors was to be burned. But I hadn't realized how difficult it would be to watch it go. The thin paper burned quickly, curling into fragments. It reminded me of the raider's torch fire biting into our carefully made paper on the island.

It made me think of my heart-verse, now hidden under a loose floorboard in my room. That paper would hardly last a few seconds against the flames, if it were found. I shuddered.

"Gyotia will receive your work," said Laiyonea.

Prince Mati stepped forward and threw his own sheaf of papers onto the fire, then watched them burn.

"The lesson will continue tomorrow morning," said Laiyonea. She turned to go back to the stairs.

I stood staring at the shreds burning in the fire.

"It gets easier after awhile," murmured the prince beside me.

I turned to him. "Even your work has to burn?"

He grinned. "Only until I become king," he said.