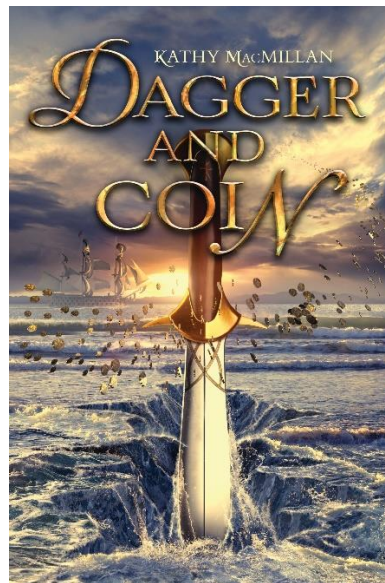
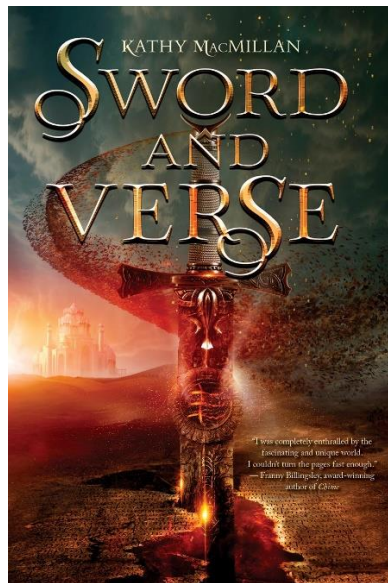


The Council of Four

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



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First Edition

The Council of Four

Soraya

This story takes place between Chapters Forty-eight and Forty-nine of Sword and Verse.

IT HAD BEEN a day since I agreed to be on the new Ruling Council, and my mother had not said a word about it. She must not have figured out the best way to use it to her advantage yet. Or perhaps she had, and was staying silent to provoke me into asking what she thought.

I watched her as I sat on the bed Aunt Silya and I shared in the priest's residence at the Temple of Aqil. Mother lay in the second bed, one arm over her eyes, her other hand on her copious stomach. I'd already given her one of the little honey-herb packets that were supposed to help her dizziness, but I couldn't help worrying.

Alshara was curled up on her side next to Mother, facing the wall. Mother took up so much space that Alshara practically clung to the edge of the bed. If she'd been in her usual state, my sister would have been complaining nonstop, but she'd hardly said more than two words in the past five days, since she had witnessed our father being cut down by the Arnath Resistance, since I'd had to tell her, haltingly, of finding the body of our sister Aliana, her twin, lifeless in the courtyard of the palace.

I never thought that I would actually miss Alshara's whining.

I should have been relishing the peace; Aunt Silya and her constant chatter had removed to the gardens with much muttering that my mother had made the room smell like a barnyard. She wasn't wrong—Mother tended to sweat profusely when the headaches and dizziness took her, and we hardly had the perfumes, oils, and powders we had once had to cover up foul odors.

I was debating with myself. I didn't quite know what it meant, the fact that I had agreed yesterday, in front of everyone, to be on the new Ruling Council, and I was annoyed that no one had bothered to enlighten me. I was sick of sitting around waiting for something to happen, but it felt indecently self-revealing to seek out those answers. I couldn't have Mati and Raisa and Jonis thinking I was *eager* to join in their plans.

I ran my finger over my father's signet ring, worn on my right thumb because it was so large it slipped off every other finger. The pad of my index finger was becoming callused from the number of times I had repeated this gesture over the past few days. *This is ridiculous*, I decided. I was head of the Gamo family now. If Mati and Jonis didn't want me on this council, then that was all the more reason for me to force them to give me answers.

I pushed myself up off the bed and smoothed the skirt of the yellow dress I'd been wearing for days now. Aunt Silya had disappeared not long after we'd arrived at the Temple of Aqil and returned with a pile of clothes, of which this dress had been the least offensively plain. The fact that she had known her way around the priest's residence made me wonder exactly what kind of relationship she'd had with Penta Rale, her brother-in-law, and whether any inappropriateness

had started before or after her husband had died. I was certain that she had been the one to convince my father, her younger brother, to join in Rale's coup.

Regardless, I'd been glad enough to shed my torn and muddy wedding dress. I would have liked to toss it into the fire, but I knew how much the silk in the rosettes would be worth when unraveled. Most of my family's wealth remained in the west at Pira, of course, but our finances would not escape the ravages in the city unscathed, and there was no sense being wasteful.

When I stepped into the hallway, Valdis looked up from his seat outside the door. I started to tell him where I was going, as if I owed him an explanation, but I ran my finger over my father's signet ring on my thumb and stopped myself. I was his mistress, not his charge.

"Stay and guard them," I ordered, though he'd done nothing to indicate that he planned to do anything else.

I marched down the hallway, glancing into open rooms and straining to hear conversations behind closed doors. I had no idea where to find Mati or the others, but I was reluctant to ask anyone I passed. I kept my head up and turned a corner as if I knew where I was going, and caught a glimpse of Mati entering a room at the end. I went directly to it and knocked on the closed door.

"Coming," said Mati's muffled voice.

He opened the door a moment later, tying the laces of a rough brown tunic that didn't suit him at all. His hair was damp and the ends dripped onto his shoulders. He looked nothing like a king, which was fortunate, since he wasn't one any longer.

I couldn't help a bit of satisfaction at the fear that flashed over his face at the sight of me. My father had inspired fear in his enemies, but the only people who'd ever been afraid of me had been servants dreading the edge of my sharp tongue.

After all Mati had done to me, he *should* fear me.

But he was a practiced liar, and so his face smoothed almost immediately into a false smile. "What can I do for you, my lady?"

I crossed my arms. "If there's to be a council, it needs to meet."

"Of course. Raisa needed to rest, though, and Jonis and I—"

"Thought you'd go around making all the decisions in the meantime." The idea annoyed me, but it was the deference in his tone when he spoke of Raisa that made me grit my teeth. It sickened me, how everyone had started calling her a priestess, whispering about the amazing powers she had. Whatever Raisa wanted, Raisa got. Even if it was *my* fiancé.

Even if it was me joining the council. Part of me had wanted to refuse just to spite her, but I wasn't an idiot. I knew opportunity when it presented itself.

But now Mati and Jonis were taking over as men always did, and I found myself angry with Raisa for letting them. It occurred to me that this might have been part of the reason she had asked me to join the council—because I could stand up to them as she could not.

I wasn't sure I was ready to ascribe positive motives to her.

“No, nothing like that,” said Mati soothingly. It was the tone he had used to pacify me a thousand times during our betrothal, and part of me responded to it even though I knew it was false. “We’d planned to come see you tomorrow.”

I shook my head. “There are too many important items to discuss.” I tossed my hair. “Surely she’s had enough rest by now. Where’s her room?” I glanced back down the hallway; it had to be nearby.

“It’s...er...” Mati’s face flushed. “This is her room. She’s at the bath house now.”

I looked past him to the narrow, rumped bed, where identical dents in the two pillows showed clearly how many occupants it had held. I closed my eyes briefly, reminding myself that I was free of the betrothal now. Where Mati spent his nights no longer had anything to do with me.

Then I looked at him, waiting. This would be the ideal moment for him to apologize, to at least acknowledge what he had done to me while he was running around with Raisa. But he only muttered something about coming to find me when she came back.

“I’ll be in the courtyard,” I snapped, and turned on my heel.

It took almost an hour for them to join me, and I considered returning to my room at least ten times in that hour. I didn’t like the feeling of waiting, but I was rewarded by a sense of superiority when they arrived, as though I had summoned them.

And so the very first meeting of the new Ruling Council of Qilara took place in the courtyard of the ruined Temple of Aqil, at a humble stone table with uncomfortable circular seats set into the earth. The advantage of this setup was that the seats were set far enough apart that I had a good four paces between me and Jonis, to my right, and that Mati and Raisa had to let go of each other when they sat down.

“Thank you for agreeing to do this,” said Raisa at once. Her eyes did look tired, but she aimed a smile at me, and I was absurdly reminded of my sister Aliana. That made my throat catch, which made me irrationally angry. Raisa had taken everything away from me; I did not want to associate anything about her with my sister.

“I didn’t have much choice, did I,” I said acidly, “if I didn’t want my family punished and our taxes increased.”

Raisa looked hurt. “Do you really think we’d do that?”

I lifted my eyebrows. “I have no idea what you’re capable of.” Raisa frowned, but the arrow hit its intended target; in my peripheral vision Mati stiffened. *He’d* proven himself capable of all sorts of deceptions.

For the thousandth time, I wondered why I was doing this to myself. Wouldn’t it be easier to go back to Pira, content myself with balls and gowns and managing my father’s investments?

And go back to spending every waking moment worrying about finding a suitable husband, because I couldn’t have anything worth having without a good marriage. If I went back to Pira, I would never, ever have anything of my own.

“Let’s get to it,” said Jonis. “We should agree on the set up of the council before we do anything else.”

Against my will, I was impressed at his ability to cut through the thousand murky issues that lay between the four people around this table and get to the most pressing question.

"I propose a three-vote majority to carry all issues," said Mati.

I frowned, foreseeing a large number of situations where I would be outvoted by the other three. "And suppose the one who disagrees is in the right?" I said.

"Then that person had better do a good job of convincing the others," said Mati shortly. He glanced at Raisa, and I understood that his tone was designed to show her how thoroughly he had chosen her over me—as if there could be any doubt. I braced myself for the triumph that was sure to flash in Raisa's eyes, but she only nodded thoughtfully.

"We'll all have to be honest with each other," she said, her volume making Mati's seem like a shout. "If we're not looking out for the greater good, then none of us have any business being here." She looked down at the table as she said this, but my spine stiffened as though it had been an outright accusation.

Why had she bothered to draft me for the council at all if she thought I was so selfish? Several pointed comments about how Mati had put *his* own interests first crowded my brain. But it had been several days since I'd engaged in court banter, and I couldn't find the right smooth, cutting remarks to encapsulate them.

"The greater good," repeated Jonis sarcastically. From the corner of my eye, I saw his defensive posture. He had obviously taken Raisa's words as being directed toward him, and that made me wonder what else had gone on between them. "Meaning, I suppose, that the Arnathim are just supposed to forget years of slavery and play nice."

"Of course not," said Mati impatiently. "That should be our first decree, that the Arnathim are free throughout Qilara."

"You know he would have done that before if he could have," said Raisa, her eyes on Jonis. "But that should be the second decree. The first has to make the language of the gods available to everyone."

I bristled. "We haven't agreed on the three-vote majority yet."

Mati sighed. "All right, does everyone agree that three votes carry an issue?" I opened my mouth, and he added, "So long as every councilor has had a chance to speak on it first?"

"Agreed," I said. Jonis and Mati repeated it, but Raisa just nodded.

"You have to actually say it out loud for it to be binding," I told her, rolling my eyes a little.

Mati frowned at me, but said, "She's right."

Raisa cleared her throat. "Agreed."

"All right," said Mati, "on to our first decree. We remove all restriction on learning to read and write."

That passed easily—it might have been the only thing we all agreed on. Then Mati said, "Second decree: we declare the Arnathim to be entirely free throughout Qilara."

"Agreed," said Raisa and Jonis together, practically before Mati had finished speaking.

He smiled. "Agreed."

They all looked at me. They didn't need my vote; it had already carried. But it obviously mattered a great deal to all three of them that I agreed. I knew that they would never see me as a full member of this council if I didn't, and I needed them to believe that I was here to be a part of everything this council did.

"Agreed," I said, and tried not to think about the millions of saltbricks' worth of slave labor my family would lose. We'd lose it anyway, even if I hadn't said the word, I reminded myself, but this way I made sure I had a place in the decision making, instead of being at the mercy of whatever decree the council put out.

And who said I couldn't use my place to make sure this council put out decrees favorable to me, too? I traced my father's ring, formulating the best way to present the proposal I wanted to make, so that the others would see it as benefitting the greater good they were so concerned about.

"And we should outlaw slavery entirely," said Raisa. "To make sure it doesn't happen again, to anyone."

I grimaced, thinking of the things my Aunt Silya had been whispering about the Arnathim. "That would be wise, to keep Qilarites from fearing retaliation," I said, considering Raisa. Maybe she was smarter than I had thought.

"And because slavery is wrong and horrible, of course," said Jonis in a hard voice. I didn't look at him, and he didn't turn to me as he said, but I could feel the hatred rolling off of him.

Mati and Raisa exchanged an uneasy look.

"So, slavery is outlawed throughout Qilara," said Mati. "Agreed?"

We all agreed, but the way he had taken over voicing Raisa's proposal, the way she let him, irritated me. It also gave me an idea for how to couch my suggestion.

"I have a proposal," I said, and all three of them looked at me in surprise. Did they think I had joined this council just to be disagreeable and make cutting remarks? "We change the property laws to allow men and women, married or not, to own and inherit equally."

"I hardly think that's a priority," said Jonis.

I ignored him and watched Mati. He was a Scholar; he knew full well that all the negotiations about my dowry and my inheritance had taken place between him and his father and my father, that I had been excluded from everything. If he wanted to talk about inclusion and equality, fine, but here was the test: would he be willing to grant that equality to women?

"It...is a priority," Mati said at last.

"No woman should be forced to marry in order to survive," said Raisa, meeting my eyes.

I was disconcerted by the understanding I saw there, and I nodded.

"But this isn't just about you, Soraya," said Mati.

"That's not why she said it!" said Raisa, with more heat than I had ever heard from her. "It doesn't just affect her."

Mati glanced at Jonis, and I could see that the two of them had discussed the fact that the council would need my money. "All right," he said. "Men and women inherit equally. Agreed."

The rest of us repeated it, and I closed my eyes with a sigh of relief. “The sooner we write up those decrees and have them read out in the city, the better,” I said. “Particularly if you’re thinking of borrowing money from the Gamo estate.”

“That’s not why we wanted you on the council!” said Raisa at once.

I shook my head. “We’ll have to be honest with each other,” I said, mocking her earnest tone from earlier, and her cheeks reddened. “Don’t insult my intelligence. Nothing will happen without money, and where else is it going to come from? I’ll want it all paid back, with interest. And I’ll be in charge of all financial matters.”

Jonis made an offended noise, but I slapped a hand on the table and spoke to Mati. “These two have never had a single gyot in their lives, and you managed to bankrupt an entire country. So if you’re not going to be sensible enough to put me in charge of the money, say so now so I can get out.”

“That was my father, not me,” muttered Mati.

“Soraya raises a good point,” said Raisa. “We should all oversee different areas, according to our strengths.”

What followed was a tedious discussion of various priorities, and the talk went round and round until Mati excused himself and came back with a roll of paper, ink and quill, and started taking notes like a common scribe. But it did help, once we put things down on paper, and by fourth bell we had agreed, after some argument, that Mati and Raisa would handle the public audiences and the priests, and Jonis would oversee the rebuilding. None of them dared argue about me handling the money, which showed more sense on their part than I had expected.

Jonis proposed that all members of the Resistance be pardoned for their past actions. The rational part of me knew it made sense—the population of the city had shifted, with most of the Scholars having died or fled, and not pardoning the Resistance would have been inviting a civil war which we were hardly equipped to handle. Nevertheless, I kept my lips firmly pressed together when the other three voted. It carried without me, of course, but I had watched the Resistance butcher my father, and I would not pardon anyone who had been a party to that.

“And what about Emtiria?” said Mati, obviously trying to change the subject, possibly because I had my hands clenched together on the table in front of me and Jonis had fallen into a deadly silence.

“You think the emperor will try to take the city now?” I said with a laugh. “You obviously don’t know the Emtirians very well. They’ll wait until we rebuild, and then take it.”

Mati looked uneasily from Jonis to Raisa to me. “I guess...you don’t know, do you?” He ran one hand through his hair. “On the day of the...wedding...there were ten thousand Emtirian soldiers set to come through the pass before it was destroyed—”

“Before Sotia destroyed it, you mean,” said Raisa firmly.

Mati nodded.

I frowned. “But why would Emtiria...” I trailed off as my father’s puzzling words to me on my wedding day flashed through my mind: *You’ll never have to suffer his touch again after this day, my dear.* I’d suspected that Rale and my father had planned to assassinate Mati, but it hadn’t

occurred to me that they would have plotted with Qilara's greatest enemy to cement their hold on their throne. "My father conspired with the Emtirians. Is that what you're trying to say?"

Mati nodded.

"We know you had nothing to do with it," said Raisa.

"Of course I didn't," I snapped. "Do you think my father told me anything?" But I had known, or at least suspected, that he and Rale would have killed Mati. Would I have done anything to stop him, if the wedding had gone on uninterrupted?

With all that had happened in the last few days, I hadn't stopped to consider what the everyday reality of it would have been like, sitting on the throne that my father had bought for me with my husband's blood. But I knew I wouldn't have been free, or independent, not the way I wanted. I'd fooled myself into thinking my father had seen me as an ally in his plan, but the more hidden pieces of it I discovered, the more I saw that I had been nothing but a pawn to him.

Of course I had; I was just a useless daughter in his eyes. Even the ring, the symbol of him choosing me as his heir—until a few minutes ago it had been a worthless symbol, as I wouldn't have been able to touch a bit of my inheritance until I married.

I had sunk into my own thoughts, and the others were still speaking. I chastised myself for failing to pay attention—one of them might have said something I could use—but when I tuned back in I realized there was no danger of that. Jonis was spouting some nonsense about the North Company mounting a perimeter around the Valley of Qora, and the others were nodded seriously.

"You think we can fight Emtiria?" I said. "Are you mad? We didn't stand a chance even when we had a fully functioning government and a capital that wasn't half underwater."

"We've held them off!" said Mati heatedly. "Emtiria hasn't made much headway since Asuniaka fell last year."

I tapped my fingernails on the table. "Of course not, if they were conspiring with someone inside the court. Why would the emperor throw men and supplies away when he can get what he wants through an alliance? Honestly, use your brain." It was fortunate they had me here to see these things, since they were all apparently so blind to them.

And fortunate for me, whispered a voice in my mind, *that they are so blind.* That would allow me to decide which insights to share as needed. Now, for example, I had a particular reason for wanting them to understand how the Emtirian mind worked.

Mati's jaw worked angrily. Raisa laid a hand on his arm, but her eyes were on me. "What do you propose?" she asked.

"Make Emtiria an ally," I said at once. "We're going to need supplies to rebuild. We negotiate favorable trade terms for Emtirian merchants, waive border tariffs, use the emperor's mines and quarries exclusively. If we're providing him profit, he won't have a reason to invade."

"But what about once we've rebuilt?" asked Raisa, just as Mati said, "Qilara has its own mines and quarries."

The question of wages for miners and quarry workers was one I had been dreading—as it would impact my family’s finances terribly. “Do you really think most Qilarite mines and quarries will be able to stay open without a source of cheap labor?”

“They can and will,” said Jonis. “People need employment.”

I kept my eyes on Mati, as if he had spoken, not Jonis. “The Emtirian output will be far cheaper than paying slaves—”

“Appropriate wages for *workers* is something we’ll have to discuss,” said Mati over me. “But the question now is what to do about Emtiria. Do we want our business going to the country that’s been trying to destroy us for years?” I recognized the edge in his tone—the wounded pride of men. No matter how much Mati Villari tried to masquerade as a more open-minded, sensitive specimen, he was male to the core, and the business with Emtiria during his reign had emasculated him a great deal. He clearly wouldn’t be sensible about any of this.

Raisa looked uncertainly at him, and I saw that she would follow his lead. Again. I sighed. She might know the language of the gods, but she was hopelessly out of her depth with politics. It was ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous, that I, a Gamo, had to rely on these three for any hint of power, that I couldn’t even access my own inheritance without their approval.

“We’ll need funding to get the city rebuilt,” I said, “and if you think you’re borrowing it all from me, you’re quite mistaken. There will be a market in Emtiria to unload things we don’t need. It would be foolish to alienate the emperor or his cabinet now.”

Mati frowned. “Selling to them is all right,” he said, “but I won’t agree to making special deals with them or waiving tariffs on their goods. That’s just inviting Emtiria to take over from the inside again.”

Raisa lifted a hesitant hand. “Why?” she asked. Her cheeks were pink; at least she had the decency to be embarrassed by her own astonishing ignorance.

Mati turned to her. “Emtirians believe that wealth is the sign of their god, Poro’s, favor. They’ll do anything for money, and they consider taking a gamble a religious act. If the emperor gets his claws into our trade, we’ll never get him out of it. And that wouldn’t be any better than—”

He stopped abruptly, and I knew he had been about to say something about my father’s coup.

Raisa nodded seriously, as though she had actually gotten enough from this jumbled explanation to make an informed decision. “I agree,” she said. “We can sell to them, like Soraya said. But no special deals.”

I shook my head impatiently. “The emperor probably already *has* his claws in Qilarite trade. We have an opportunity right now, while things are in flux, to approach him and make a deal. My father was close to the ambassador and I think I could—”

“And that,” said Mati, “is precisely why we can’t. If we want anyone to believe that our council is different, we can’t go making the same kind of underhanded alliances.”

I laughed out loud at the idealistic arrogance of this statement, but then I saw Mati’s serious expression, saw Raisa and Jonis nod earnestly, and my mouth fell open.

Gods, what had I gotten myself into? It would be a miracle if this council lasted the Shining.

Fine, said a hard little part of me. You know what to do. Go with it, and be ready to jump onto the next ship when it comes into port.

“We sell to Emtiria where we can, but don’t ally with the emperor. Agreed?” said Mati. But it was just a formality, because he already knew he had the support of the other two. Still, I surprised him by smiling and saying, “Agreed,” as though he had won me over with his passionate argument.

We hadn’t, I noted, said anything about restricting trade by individuals with Emtiria, and I would take full advantage of that.

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.