

Finding Aliana:

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

by Kathy MacMillan

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First Edition

Finding Aliana

Soraya

*This story takes place during
Chapters Forty-three to Forty-five of Sword and Verse.*

“NO!” I SCREAMED as my father fell face-down to the dirt. This was not the way for a Gamo to die! He should have died standing, and elegant, and composed, and beautiful. He should have died in a position of power.

The two Arnath men he’d been fighting spat upon my father’s dying body. He convulsed once more, then slowly, so slowly, turned his head toward the place where Aliana had stood.

I gasped back a sob, realizing that Aliana and her attacker were gone—how long had they been gone? I pulled Alshara toward the front of the palace. She balked, still gaping at Father.

“He’s gone, or will be any moment,” I snapped at her. “Pull yourself together.”

“Aliana,” my sister whispered piteously.

“I know,” I said. “We’ll find her.” One of the flowers from my hairdo fell into my face, and I ripped it out and threw it to the ground.

But the courtyard at the front of the palace was even more chaotic than the garden. Someone ran at us as we entered, and I screamed and shoved Alshara behind me, before realizing that it was Aunt Silya. Words were streaming from her mouth, but I couldn’t make sense of anything she said. She pushed us up the steps of the palace, and I let her, relieved for once to let her take charge. Yes, I thought as we ran into the entrance hall, yes. If only I could get us up to my suite, we could bar the door until this madness was over.

And then there were screams behind us, and someone pushed me. I glanced back over my shoulder and saw a flash of steel by the door. The fighters were following us. I hiked up my skirts with one hand, clamped the other around Alshara’s wrist, and took off up the stairs at top speed. I practically dove into my room, nearly slamming the door on Aunt Silya’s foot as she slipped in behind us. Others banged on the door, begging to be let in, but I slid the heavy lock bar into place without a second thought. I cringed as screams replaced the begging. The armed men had caught up with the runners.

Alshara sank onto my bed. Aunt Silya's mouth was still moving, but either she wasn't making any noise, or my ears weren't working properly.

My heart beat in my ears. Aliana. Aliana. Aliana.

I ran across the room to the window and swung open the shutters. The courtyard below seethed with never-ending motion, like beetles on rotting flesh, and my eyes flitted over every face, looking for my younger sister. She'd been wearing a lavender cloak—Aliana was always chilly in the sea breeze—and that should make her easy to find. I clung to that fact as I scanned the crowd below, squinting against the blinding glare of midday sunlight.

I didn't see her anywhere.

I heard Alshara's scream behind me before my feet even registered the bucking of the floor. I clutched the windowsill, watching the fighters in the courtyard falter and stumble, eyes watering as I searched for a lavender cloak. Aunt Silya dragged me away from the window, pointing at the blood dripping from Alshara's face; a vase had slid off a shelf during the quake and hit her. I stared at the blood dripping onto her lavender gown. Ruined, ruined, ruined, beat my heart.

"There are earthquakes," I said, my voice sounding loud but very even and practical in my own ears, the exact opposite of the racing of my pulse. "It is not safe to stay here."

Alshara let out a cry and wrapped her arms around her middle. "I won't go out there. They'll kill me!"

Aunt Silya clutched my shoulder so tightly that I winced. "We must go to the Temple of Aqil. Penta will protect us. He owes that to your father."

Penta Rale. The High Priest of Aqil. Her brother-in-law. My insides turned to water at the matter-of-fact way she referred to his alliance with my father, one I had only suspected until now. She'd been the link, hadn't she? She'd been the one to convince Father to join Rale's coup.

I stared at her. Had she expected this—the battle? I shuddered, remembering the words my father had spoken before he helped me on to my bridal litter. He'd planned that Mati would not survive this day.

But none of it made sense—I wasn't married yet. The marriage hadn't been consummated. I wasn't a queen.

Aunt Silya shook me. "Get up, you silly girl!" she said shrilly. I stood, wondering when I had fallen onto the bed, and why it was so hard to stand. Aunt Silya clutched my arm through the

next shaking of the earth, then, when it had stilled, she walked over to Alshara, crying in a tight knot on the bed, and slapped her. She bullied us out of the room. We stepped over the dead bodies on the threshold. We were the only living things on the second story of the palace.

I gained my senses as we crept down the hallway toward the stairs, and pushed to the lead. Much as Aunt Silya liked to talk about everlasting loyalty to the Gamo name, I knew that, if it came to it, she would push me and Alshara at any attackers to get away.

“Hush!” I told Alshara, who kept letting out a low keening sound. Her eyes went round, but she quieted.

I hovered at the bottom of the stairs, holding up a hand to keep the other two from following. There were voices, and then footsteps, and then silence.

I crept out of the shadows and took in the empty entrance hall. The way to the doors was clear. “Come,” I hissed at the other two, and they followed. My eyes were focused so intently on the front doors that I slipped in a puddle of blood. I stifled my gasp, but there was no need. From the noise level in the courtyard, it was clear where everyone was.

Aunt Silya grabbed my arm. “We can’t go out there! There must be a side exit.”

I stared at her. “We have to find Aliana.”

She looked at me as though I had spoken another language. “It’s not safe out there—”

“I’m not leaving her!” I shouted. I looked at Alshara, who had wrapped her arms around herself again and had tears coursing down her face alongside the blood. “Take Alshara, and find another door,” I snapped at my aunt. “Go to the Temple of Aqil and remind Penta Rale what this family has done for him. I’ll find Aliana and meet you there.”

Aunt Silya’s eyes were full of unbearable sympathy as she clutched my shoulder again, her fingers like talons. “Soraya...dear...”

“Go!” I shouted in her face, and then I pulled away so sharply that the sleeve of my purple wedding gown tore. I didn’t care about my exposed shoulder, though; I ran through the door and stood on the top step, craning my neck to see any hint of lavender. The sunlight had gone out, though, like a giant candle had been extinguished, and all I saw were dim shadows in the gray light. There was green—so much green—and browns and grays and blacks, and...

Red. Fire. I heard screams and smelled burning flesh, but I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat and scanned the crowd with watering eyes.

Through the smoke billowing from the gardens, I saw something, low to the ground—a flash of lavender. I skidded down the steps, keeping my eyes locked on my sister’s cloak, ducking under a sword, shoving aside a fighter—from which side, I neither knew nor cared—and hardly noticing when another blade nicked my ear.

The earth heaved as I threw myself to the ground beside her. With a horrible, scraping sound, a piece of the palace roof slid into the courtyard. I threw myself over my sister as debris and dust rained down around us.

I was already sobbing by the time I wiped the dust from my eyes and rolled her over. Her skin had been cold and lifeless under mine. I knew she was dead long before I saw the cruel red slash across her throat. Her eyes stared into the sky in an expression of mild surprise. I slid them closed and wrapped her cloak around her, whispering a death-prayer to Gyotia.

And then I shoved my grief down where it couldn’t make my hands shake or my vision blur, and I stood and walked out of the courtyard, away from the fighting and the scheming. I only looked back once, when the earth shook again and the pillars at the front of the palace fell with a resounding crash. But even then, I didn’t run, though people all about me did. I held my head high, and walked away from the scene of my wedding like a Gamo.

Like a queen.

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.