

*Raisa had a pretty rotten morning the day after she and Mati broke up.
But Mati's morning was even worse...*

EXPOSED
by Kathy MacMillan

The knocking was distant, but insistent. I burrowed under the pillow, vaguely aware that there was a reason that I didn't want to wake up. Some unpleasant knowledge hovered just out of reach.

The knocking stopped, but then came the voices—too loud. I couldn't hold to sleep with them talking like that. Blinking against sunlight too weak to be anything but the first glimpse of dawn, I groaned.

A door opened, and someone padded in.

"Your Highness?" Daki's voice was soft, apologetic.

"What is it?" I asked, my voice muffled by the pillow over my face. The knowledge was looming closer now, threatening to pounce as soon as I woke up all the way.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but your father wants to see you. The...messenger is quite insistent that you come right away."

I groaned and tossed the pillow to the floor. "Get me some clothes," I barked. Daki, who knew how I detested mornings, scuttled away unoffended.

I stumbled to the basin and splashed my face, slicking back my hair. And there it was, the thing I had been suppressing, the memory of Raisa telling me to stay away from her. "*Don't come to see me anymore.*"

I didn't have to ask if she had really meant it. She had. But surely those words had cut her as deeply as they had cut me. Perhaps in the light of the morning, she would regret them. Perhaps when I saw her at lessons, she would soften, and things could be as they were.

Except that Soraya Gamo would arrive today. Raisa wouldn't let that pass so easily.

Daki brought me clean garments, and I slipped into them distractedly. I couldn't seem to stop seeing Raisa's accusing gaze, and my heart ached with the knowledge that she was right. *I hadn't*

been open with her about Soraya – but honestly, the entire court had been talking about the upcoming betrothal for almost a year, and hadn't I told her about the endless negotiations? I thought she'd already known, that we had a tacit agreement not to discuss the matter. After all, I had referred to it many times, hadn't I? But I was slowly realizing that all the times I had done so, when she had looked away, it was in confusion, not because she'd been avoiding the subject as I had.

I slipped my shoes on and realized as I opened the door that I ought to be wondering what my father wanted so early. And why the captain of the guard stood in the anteroom waiting to escort me to him.

Was Father trying to scare me into good behavior for the betrothal ceremony? It seemed like something he would do. He needn't have bothered, though – the grief that washed over me as I replayed Raisa's words in my mind was sure to cut off any foolishness today. I kept thinking of the time when I was six years old, and had chipped my tooth on the edge of the fountain in the garden. I had screamed whenever my nurse tried to make me eat or drink, and when they called for the physician he said the nerve had been exposed. The pain was all-encompassing, until he pulled the tooth out at the root, and then I felt nothing.

That was how my heart felt now—exposed.

We reached my father's study long before I was ready. Captain Dimmin opened the door, then followed me inside.

My father sat behind his desk in a blue silk dressing gown, his fingers tapping impatiently on the desktop. Another guard stood to one side, fiddling with the top button of his uniform. Laiyonea perched in a chair opposite the desk. Despite the hour, she was dressed, not a hair out of place. Only the swift, sympathetic look she cast me gave me the slightest hint why I was there.

I realized that my day was about to become a whole lot worse.

"This guard claims to have seen you leaving the bedroom window of Raisa ke Margara last evening," Father said without preamble. "Is this true?"

If I'd had more warning, perhaps I could have denied it. But I flinched at the sound of her name, and I knew my father would not believe any lie I told after that. So I met his eyes. He ought to like that. "Yes," I said. "It's true."

Father glowered. "And what were you doing there?"

Laiyonea tensed in my peripheral vision. I could sell her out easily, and she knew it.

I thought fast. Father already knew I had been in Raisa's bedroom last night, but Laiyonea's fear told me he didn't know more than that, and that Laiyonea herself had told him nothing. Still, the one in the most danger right now was Raisa.

I forced my voice to be calm. "We were just talking."

"You can talk to her in the courtyard or the banquet room. You don't need to sneak into her bedroom to do that."

I dropped my gaze to the patterned rug and forced myself to take two deep breaths before I looked up at Father again. I wouldn't let him shake me today. This was too important. "Perhaps," I said slowly, "I needed to speak to her privately."

This was not the right thing to say. Father's lips pressed into a thin line, and he made a violent gesture at Dimmin to remove the other guard from the room. I watched them go, a flicker of apprehension in my stomach on the guard's behalf. Father didn't have the best record when it came to sparing the messenger.

I held back a sigh. Now two lives depended on what I said in the next few minutes. How had my moments of bliss with Raisa turned into this?

As soon as Gelti and the other guard shut the door behind them, Father stood and pointed a meaty finger at me. "How long," he barked, "has this been going on?"

I fought not to quail under his gaze. My hands hung loose at my sides, and I thought absurdly that, if I had been bound like the prisoner I was beginning to feel like, at least I would know what to do with my hands.

The thought almost made me laugh out loud; thank the gods I caught myself at the last moment and only a choked cough came out. Laiyonea, erect at the edge of her chair, glanced at me and then addressed my father. "It can't have been long, else I would have known," she said. The tone was, for her, verging on timid, though it still would have set Raisa's quill skittering across the page if Laiyonea had used it to order her back to work in the Adytum.

I winced at Raisa's image in my mind. Father was still staring at me as if he hadn't heard Laiyonea at all, but I jumped on what she had said. "It hasn't been long. It hasn't been anything at all. Raisa is my friend, that's all."

Father snorted. "The girl is Arnath," he said, as if that meant anything. I kept my gaze trained on Father. I didn't want to see Laiyonea's reaction to this remark, but I was angry on her behalf. Hadn't she been my father's closest advisor and confidante for years? Why wouldn't he ever acknowledge that?

"Her predecessor was my friend too, as you might remember. It's not that unusual," I said evenly, and regretted the words as soon as they were out of my mouth. *Why* did I bring up Tyasha at a time like this?

"Her predecessor was also a traitor," he said. "As *you* might remember. Are you comparing this Tutor to the last?"

"No!" I cried, horrified at the glint in his eye. I looked over at Laiyonea, but her head was bowed, her fingers twisted in her lap.

Would he speak of Tyasha that way if he knew how it hurt Laiyonea? Probably. He wouldn't ever acknowledge Laiyonea's friendship, and the fact that any of the Tutors were my friends only showed my weakness in his eyes.

And there it was, the solution I had been grasping for ever since Dimmin had led me through the door. There was only one way to protect Raisa from Father's wrath, and it wouldn't be hard to do. After all, Father was already convinced that I couldn't do anything right.

All I had to do was cement that impression, and erase any chance of ever earning his respect.

I hunched my shoulders. It was only partially an act. "Raisa isn't like that," I said, my voice coming out low and fast. "Don't blame her for this. This was my fault. I went to her room last night to talk to her, to tell her that I - " I stumbled over my words. "That I loved her." It was easy to meet Father's eyes for the next part. After all, it was the truth. "She told me to stay away from her. She doesn't want anything to do with me."

Father sat down slowly and leaned back in his chair, his narrowed eyes never leaving mine. I'd seen many levels of disappointment played out on his face in the past, from the slight headshake to a disapproving glare. But all those were nothing compared to look he gave me now, the one that said he wished he didn't even have a son.

I studied the rug again, to hide the tears that had sprung to my eyes. I doubted that the tears could possibly make my father think any less of me, but I did have some pride left. Why did I

care what he thought? He would send Raisa away in a heartbeat, and he had decreed Tyasha's execution without the slightest hesitation.

He had always said I was too soft. Well, maybe he was right. But I decided I'd rather be soft than miserable and power hungry and lonely, and never know love.

I realized all at once that my tears were exactly what were needed to tip the balance of my father's disapproval onto me, and keep Raisa clear. *Oh well*, I thought as I lifted my head, *who needs pride anyway?*

Father was opening his mouth to say something when he caught sight of my face, and his mouth twisted with disgust. He turned abruptly to Laiyonea. "Is it true, what he says about the girl?"

"I believe so," said Laiyonea. "She hasn't shown any preference for the prince, and I believe she would be too timid to accept any advances. I've told you how obedient she is."

My father rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It's still a chance to take though. Can't afford to have things mucked up today."

Laiyonea shook her head, and her voice was just a tad sharper when she spoke again. "It's too late to train another girl, you know that. And she is nothing like the last one." How was it that her voice was so even, so disdainful as she spoke about Tyasha? I could lie to my father every day for the rest of my life, and never be as good at it as Laiyonea was.

Father nodded thoughtfully. "So you've said."

Laiyonea fixed him with a stern gaze. "And still say. If you want your grandson to have a proper Tutor when the time comes, you are going to have to trust me."

Father considered her for a long moment, then turned back to me - I actually saw the respect drain from his eyes as his gaze moved. "You swear that there is nothing more to it?"

I wanted to ask why it mattered if I swore or not, when he obviously didn't believe anything I said. But I bit back this response and nodded. "By Aqil's quill," I whispered, "nothing happened between us." I should have felt guilt at using Aqil's name to seal this lie - but instead I felt that I had betrayed my own heart. To call what Raisa and I had "nothing" was the worst kind of falsehood.

The oath seemed to satisfy Father, though. He leaned back in his chair, his hands folded over his stomach. "Leave it to my nitwit son to nearly foul up this day." He sighed. "You know,

Soraya Gamo was far from the worst of the options I could have chosen for you. Another boy might be grateful."

"Thank you, Father," I mumbled.

"You misunderstand me," he said coldly. "I mean to say, you will find yourself lamenting more than just a misplaced affection if you do not straighten up. Qilara's crown may descend by blood, but nothing prevents me from naming a regent should my son be unfit for the task."

I stared at him, a cold knot in my chest. Despite all the times he had made his disappointment in me obvious, I had always harbored a sense that I would prove him wrong when I became king.

And now he would take that from me too?

Father, now sure that he had my attention, went on. "You will welcome Soraya Gamo today with a smile. You will conduct yourself during the betrothal ceremony like a prince. You will avail yourself of every opportunity to speak to Soraya and make her feel every bit the queen she is going to be. You will not look at or speak to Raisa ke Margara again. You will have your lessons separately." Here he looked over at Laiyonea, who nodded approvingly. "And the bars I will have placed on your window will prevent any further nighttime wanderings. Do I make myself clear?"

I nodded. I opened my mouth to ask what he would do to Raisa, but thought better of it.

"And the girl, Your Highness?" said Laiyonea. I flashed her a grateful look.

Father's jaw twitched. "If you can keep her out of my way, and she causes no further irritation, then you may keep her," he said, as though Raisa were an asoti who had chewed the furniture. "And if *he* cannot get over his infatuation and behave, I will of course have to remove her."

Laiyonea nodded impassively. I swallowed hard. Message received. If I wanted any chance to see Raisa again, I couldn't speak to her. Or even look at her.

Well, given that she had told me to stay away from her, that shouldn't be too hard, right?

Father moodily pulled a scroll in front of him. It was as good as a dismissal, and Laiyonea rose and went to the door. I should have gone with her, but I laid my hand on the edge of the desk. "I'm sorry, Father," I said softly. Maybe I thought to appeal to the fact that I was his only son. Maybe I felt guilty. Maybe I was just the spineless brat he thought I was.

My father looked up sharply at that, and I knew that even my apology was further proof of my weakness to him. He made a dismissive gesture, but I stayed put. "What about the guard?" I asked.

He frowned. "If he keeps his mouth shut, he'll have nothing to worry about."

My heart sank at the prospects for both parts of that statement.

Laiyonea touched my arm. "Your father has other matters to attend to," she said. She ushered me out into the hallway. I separated myself from her as soon as we were around the corner.

"How could you be such an idiot?" she hissed. "Bringing up Tyasha when he was in that mood."

"How can you let him treat you that way?" I replied, but there was no fire in my tone. I was suddenly tired enough to collapse right there in the hallway.

Laiyonea stopped and looked hard at my face. "Gods, Raisa did break it off, didn't she? You weren't lying."

Somehow hearing her say it out loud like that made it worse. I nodded.

Laiyonea took an audible breath. "She really didn't know about Soraya?"

I shook my head mutely. How was it that Laiyonea was so clued into Raisa's feelings, when I had been so blindsided by her anger last night?

A flash of sympathy passed over her face before her cool efficiency snapped back into place. "Well, it makes no difference now one way or another. It's over, and that's for the best. No use lamenting the eagle that has already flown."

I laughed, but not out of humor. "Well, if you'll excuse me," I said bleakly. "I have a betrothal ceremony to attend."