

Ferzil is sick

When Kadri turned up for the fifth day in a row, Beyazit was annoyed. "Why is it you again? Where is Ferzil?"

Kadri got onto the ground and prostrated himself. "Celestial Emperor, I am unworthy. But Chief Eunuch Ferzil is very unwell and unable to attend." Kadri hesitated and swallowed. "We hope he survives."

Beyazit sat up. "What?"

Kadri said to the floor, "He has had a cough for many weeks."

"I know," said Beyazit. "It was annoying. I told him to shut up."

"The cough turned into a deeper cough, and then a fever got into his lungs," Kadri explained.

Beyazit paused. Now he felt bad for telling Ferzil to shut up, but he wasn't going to admit that to Kadri. And the truth was, it had been very annoying: *cough, cough, cough* all the time.

"Who is looking after Ferzil?" he asked instead.

Kadri put his head up. "Your Radiant Mother, Celestial One."

Beyazit pulled himself up in alarm. "My *mother*! Are you eunuchs mad? We must go down there immediately to check she is not killing him?"

Kadri sat up. "She's not."

Beyazit stood up. "I must see Ferzil *immediately*. Get my visiting robes."

"I will arrange it," said Kadri.

Shortly they trooped down to the harem: Kadri and a train of eunuch clerks behind Beyazit like a fat little clutch of goslings. Beyazit chuckled to himself at the vision this provoked in his head.

"What ails you, Emperor?" said Kadri.

"Nothing," said Beyazit.

Of course, the entry to the harem *had* to pass his mother's apartment first, at the bottom of the hill. His mother would not be happy if she could not spy on everyone who passed, including him. Ferzil had told Beyazit that she had set up a mirror so she could watch passers-by without being seen. "I tried to persuade her out of it as unworthy and insane," Ferzil had said moodily, "but on this I could not make her budge." Given that Ferzil seemed to be the only person in Harad capable of reining in his mother's insane behaviour on a consistent basis, Beyazit declined to criticise the eunuch for this one failing, but he was always aware of the mirror.

They entered his mother's house, and Eunuch Murat came into the foyer and prostrated himself. "We are unworthy, Celestial One. To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?"

Beyazit had no time for eunuch grovelling. "Take me to my mother," he said.

Murat took him into the lounge where his mother loved to sit. Beyazit's mother sat, hunched over, frowning, not in her usual upright posture. To Beyazit's surprise, she was not wearing makeup, and he could see purple hollows under her eyes.

His mother sat up when he came in, and fixed him with her startling grey-eyed gaze. "Son."

"Mother," said Beyazit. "I am come to see Chief Eunuch Ferzil."

"Ah," said his mother. "I will take you up to his room. He is still fevered, alas. We are waiting for the fever to break, and the liquid in his lungs to clear."

The eunuch clerks stayed in the lounge, but Beyazit and Kadri followed his mother up the stairs and down the corridor to a room at the end.

Ferzil lay in a narrow bed in an austere room. There was barely any decoration. The only visible personal effects were on the bedside table: the gold ring Ferzil habitually wore and, for some reason, a flute. On the low cupboard, there was a hairbrush, some medication, bowls and wet cloths. His mother's two maids sat on either side of the bed, looking worried. Ferzil's eyes were closed, but he moved a little, and coughed: a deep, barking, wet cough. His chest rattled and bubbled as he settled. His skin was dripping with sweat, and his face was a strange greyish-brown colour, quite unlike his usual skin tone.

"O, that is awful," said Beyazit quietly. Then he looked around the room. "Mother! You put him in *this* room? This is a horrid room!"

His mother flushed. "I did, son. And now—will he move out of this house? No, he will not, although I freed him and told him he could go to the Chief Eunuch's chambers if he so chose. About a year after he moved in, I got the maids to try to make it nicer as ah, er, an apology, I suppose, for the shoe throwing—and he took down the hangings and the vases and gave them back to me and told me he wasn't worthy."

"He is a strange man," murmured Beyazit.

"He is," agreed his mother.

"Ha! He wears dark blue pyjamas to match his uniform!" Beyazit was fascinated.

Kadri cleared his throat. "Those are standard issue. Most of the rest of us get something nicer, Celestial One, after we've been here for a while. Maybe something colourful, in silk."

"He has collected *six* pairs of horrible standard issue cotton pyjamas over the years, and darns them when they get holes," said his mother, extremely disapprovingly. "I tried to throw them in the midden heap and he fetched them out."

Beyazit laughed with delight. "This is hilarious!"

"Shush!" said his mother, but it was too late.

Ferzil stirred and opened his eyes. He stared at Beyazit. "Firooz?" he said in a breathless voice.

"I beg your pardon?" said Beyazit, unsure if he'd heard correctly.

"Roos, you shouldn't feel guilty," said Ferzil earnestly. "It had to be me who was castrated, not you. I'm happy that you have a nice life with your wife and children."

"You are?" said Beyazit.

"I am," said Ferzil. "It brings me joy. Would the children like some toys from Beyazim?"

Beyazit shrugged; he wasn't sure what the right answer was. Eventually, after his mother nudged him with her elbow, he said, "They would?"

"I will get some then." Ferzil looked worried. "That is, if I don't die. Remember how Fernaaz looked back then, Roos? So sick and thin, so feverish. My cough is like hers. You did save her, didn't you? I'm sure you told me you did."

His mother leaned forward and spoke softly to Beyazit. "Firooz is one of his older brothers, and Fernaaz is one of his younger sisters. He has been talking about them incessantly."

Ferzil's fevered eyes wandered toward the source of his mother's voice and lit up as they fixed upon her. "My love! You are back!"

Beyazit stared at his mother. Amaya's face had gone scarlet and she was looking at the roof. "So. He is hallucinating. He seems also to have mistaken me for someone else," she muttered. "It keeps happening."

Kadri sniggered and sniggered uncontrollably.

"Someone he loved?" said Beyazit.

"Yes, he's mistaken me for someone loveable, and hence we know that his mind truly is unhinged with this fever," his mother said tartly, and then sighed in a put-upon way. "I must pretend to be this person; we've found that he doesn't settle unless I do."

Zara stood up and his mother took her seat.

"Hullo, Ferzil," Amaya said, surprisingly gently.

"Do you *really* love me?" said Ferzil, with worry. "You weren't tricking me?"

Beyazit's mother's face was very pink when she glanced back at Beyazit. "I do," she said, eventually, haltingly. "Now hush. You're making a fool out of yourself."

"I don't like making a fool out of myself, unless it is for you," said Ferzil, tossing and turning on his pillow restlessly.

His mother put her hand on Ferzil's forehead. "You're burning up. You're not making any sense. Do be quiet, Ferzil. My son is here. He's come to visit."

Zara handed his mother a cloth from the bowl of water, and his mother gently washed down Ferzil's face. "There. Is that better?"

"It is, thank you, May," said the eunuch, but then he began to cough, with the awful wet bark again, and his mother helped him sit up.

"Who's 'May'?" said Beyazit, after Ferzil had finished coughing into one of the wet cloths.

"The woman he loves," said his mother shortly, swapping the soiled cloth for a fresh one, and concentrating on laving Ferzil's hands and neck.

"Am I going to die?" said Ferzil to his mother, hoarsely, clinging to her. "I don't want to lose you."

"I hope not," said his mother, gently detaching Ferzil's hands from her scarf. "At whom will I throw shoes if you're not here?"

"If he dies and I become Chief Eunuch, I do not consent to having shoes thrown at me, for the avoidance of doubt, Radiant Mother," noted Kadri from behind, in clinical tones.

"Once you threw four shoes at me in succession, May, and *I did not react at all*," said Ferzil gleefully and wheezily to Beyazit's mother. "It was my record!" Then his face fell. "Worse things have been thrown at me. When I was going into Beyazim to meet my Umma, someone threw the guts of a goat at me."

Beyazit blinked. "Why did someone throw goat's guts at you, Ferzil? Would you like me to punish them?"

Ferzil looked at him. "You know why, Rooz, you just don't like to admit it. It's because I'm a eunuch. Normal people don't like eunuchs, because they don't look quite right. I know you still think of me as your brother. But Firossa told me how you were horrified and disgusted because I look like Umma, not like a man."

His mother pushed Ferzil's sweaty, black curly hair back from his forehead, and spoke very softly, so that Beyazit had to strain to hear her. "Your mother is beautiful. You *do* look like her. But hush, please, lie back down and be quiet."

"Umma has very nice eyes," agreed Ferzil loudly, gazing at his mother with feverish intensity, and ignoring her command to lie down. "You like my eyes too, don't you? You told me you thought they were pretty." Kadri made a strange, strangled squeaking noise behind Beyazit.

"Hush, hush. Why don't you close your pretty eyes and go back to sleep?" said his mother, leaning over and putting pillows behind Ferzil. "I'll prop you up like *this* so your chest doesn't rattle so much. You need sleep. Your irritating brother Firooz has woken you; I am annoyed with him."

"Do you think I should sleep?" said Ferzil. "Will it make you happy if I do?"

"Definitely," said his mother, and passed her hand over his eyes. "There. There. Close your eyes." Then after Ferzil closed his eyes, she made an angry shooing gesture at Beyazit and Kadri and glared at them in her usual way, like she wanted to kill them: evidently the pretence of being a loveable person was to be dropped immediately when Ferzil could not see her.

Beyazit and Kadri left the room with Zara, and then Beyazit startled. "Kadri. You are *crying*?"

"I wish I knew whether I looked like my mother," said Kadri, snivelling into a dark blue handkerchief. "O, that was just so, so adorable and he does look very like his mother. She visited the harem once, you know?"

"Have people thrown things at you?" said Beyazit.

Kadri shrugged. "Of course."

"I cannot believe that my mother is being nice to Ferzil," mused Beyazit. "It's strange that this woman he loved has a name so similar to my mother's, isn't it?"

"An extraordinary chance," agreed Kadri.

"I hope he doesn't die," said Beyazit.

"Me too, Celestial One," said Kadri.

"May the blessings of heaven save him," said Zara.

* * * * *

Two months later, Kadri said to Beyazit, "Chief Eunuch Ferzil requests that you come to the harem and see him."

"Why can't *he* come here?" said Beyazit. "The Emperor waits on no one!"

"He is still breathless when he walks, and rather slow," said Kadri, sombrely. "That's one thing he wants to talk to you about."

"O," said Beyazit. "I don't suppose he's up to singing again?"

"Certainly not."

Later in the afternoon, they went down to Beyazit's mother's apartment. Ferzil was sitting in a chair in the lounge. His colour was much better than it had been on previous visits. He had a chintzy purple blanket tucked around his lower body. Beyazit's mother was sitting in a second chair, eyeing Ferzil suspiciously. "Ferzi, if you take off that blanket, I will put it back on."

Ferzil pushed the blanket onto the ground. "I don't need it anymore."

Beyazit's mother's eyes widened, and she drew a breath in, as if she was going to scream.

Beyazit burst out laughing, and the pair turned to him, and sat straighter, both looking slightly embarrassed.

"Son," said his mother.

"Mother," said Beyazit.

Ferzil got out of his chair, clumsily, and tried to prostrate himself on the ground onto the blanket. He began to cough.

"O by the gods, Ferzil," said his mother, with extreme irritation, and dragged Ferzil back up by one arm, shoved him into the chair, then tucked the blanket back around him, with irritated jabs.

"Be nice, mother," said Beyazit. "Remember, when he was feverish, he thought you were lovely. Don't you want him to still retain a little of that view?"

Both his mother and Ferzil looked away from each other, and his mother flushed deeply. Beyazit thought Ferzil was flushing too, but it was harder to tell.

"I apologise for any foolish things I might have said while my mind wandered, Celestial Emperor," said Ferzil, eventually.

"No need," said Beyazit. "It provided me with much entertainment. You wanted to see me?"

Kadri came over and knelt next to Ferzil.

"So," said Ferzil, "I am not going to be able to serve you in the way which I would prefer, Celestial Emperor. Not any time soon."

"Not even one day a week," said his mother, her eyes narrowed.

"Accordingly, Kadri, Amaya and I have come up with a more satisfactory division of labour," said Ferzil. "Kadri shall be Chief Eunuch—"

"But—?" said Beyazit, suddenly strangely bereft. "You are leaving me?"

"Kadri will be much better at the Palace-facing duties anyway," said Ferzil. "I shall not desert you, Beloved Emperor. I shall retain my previous duties of harem management: Kadri and I have decided to split the role in half. I shall be Deputy Chief Eunuch and Administrator of the Harem."

"He is much better than me at dealing with the harem-facing duties," said Kadri. "He has much more patience for the cat fights, hair-pulling, biting and so forth. I have found these matters ... difficult ... while he has been indisposed."

"I wanted to throw water on them and spank them all," muttered his mother, clapping her hands. *"Smack, smack, smack!"*

"That is why *you* do not manage the harem," Beyazit said to his mother. "You're not to touch *my* wives. I will exile you if you do. For some unknown reason the dear silly dumplings are convinced you're a sweet woman; please don't give them reason to think otherwise. Let them live with their delusions, even though Ferzil has now recovered from his fevered mania and realises the truth."

His mother did not respond to this, but glared at Ferzil. "To return to the discussion we were having before: you do not have to do *anything*. Nothing! I freed you so you have no obligations to anyone. You should just sit in this chair and rest."

"It is very boring, Amaya, and this blanket is hot," said Ferzil, gently, calmly.

"I sit with you for much of the day—!" his mother said in dangerous tones. "Are you saying I'm boring—?"

"If he wants to do duties, Umma, just let him," said Beyazit. "You are not his master."

"Nor are you!" exclaimed his mother, pushing herself to the edge of her seat and pointing at him. "Hah! I freed him, so you are not either!"

"Amaya—" said Ferzil warningly, giving his mother a look. Then he began to cough: a much less unpleasant cough than the one he had some months ago, but still wheezy.

To Beyazit's astonishment, rather than continuing to fight, his mother settled back into her seat, and scowled, crossing her arms. He did not know how Ferzil managed to quell her with a look, and wished there was someone else who could do it, in the event that Ferzil had a relapse or died.

Ferzil recovered himself from his coughing fit, and cleared his throat. "The point is, Amaya, I am my own master. That is the gift you gave me. So, if I want to manage the harem for the Celestial Emperor, I shall."

"I should never have freed you, Ferzil," muttered his mother.

Ferzil grinned hugely at her, almost foolishly. "I know. It was extremely silly of you. It delights me to know that the famous Amaya of Amrun did something this ridiculous."

"You really don't have to keep living here anymore, Ferzil, if she vexes you too sorely," said Beyazit. "I saw that room you were living in. It was spartan, and entirely inappropriate for a Chief Eunuch or whatever you are now?"

Ferzil and his mother exchanged long and cryptic looks.

"I have moved to a different room," said Ferzil, eventually, shyly. "Or, I should say, your mother moved me to a different room at a time when I was incapable of protesting. You do not have to worry. My new room is much better furnished and larger than the one I was in."

"It is identical in every aspect to my own room," said his mother, looking haughtily down her nose at Ferzil.

Beyazit grimaced. "Is this room *horrendously* purple, perchance, Chief—er, Deputy Chief—Eunuch?"

"It is, but luckily I like purple," said Ferzil. "Except when people force purple blankets on me."

"You must wear it lest you catch a chill again," said his mother. "You work too hard and do not look after yourself. That is why you became ill: because you work too hard."

"*By the gods*, you two sound like an old married couple," said Beyazit. "When's the wedding?"

Both Ferzil and his mother snapped their mouths shut immediately and stared at him with horrified huge eyes, their bodies tensed. By contrast, Kadri's mouth dropped open, and he recoiled slightly, and appeared to murmur a prayer.

Beyazit laughed and laughed. "I'm jesting, I'm jesting! The *looks* on your faces!"

"Only a fool would want to be married to me," said his mother, acidly, recovering somewhat.

"I could say the same regarding myself," said Ferzil, glancing at his mother uneasily.

"Teeheehee," giggled Kadri hysterically, rocking back and forth on his knees. "Teeheeeheeeheee hee."

"Do be quiet, Kadri, or I shall hit you with shoes," snapped his mother. "It's not that funny."

"O but it is," giggled Kadri. "Really it *is*."

"He likes to have such things to gossip with the clerks about," said Beyazit. It was one of the upsides of Kadri: he was a *much* better source of gossip than Ferzil.

Ferzil smiled. "Zahel is almost as bad, as is Amit, although his gossip does tend to centre around what people eat. But that is of interest at times."

"Neither are as good at gossip as *me*," said Kadri, proudly.

"Anyway, I shall accept the new temporary arrangement," said Beyazit. "We can see what happens when you are better, Ferzil."

Ferzil and Kadri looked at each other. "Indeed," said Kadri.

"I think you shall find this new arrangement most convenient, Celestial Emperor," said Ferzil. "Really most convenient. But see what you think?"

"It is not the place for us to suggest," said Kadri, sagely.

"Most certainly not," said Ferzil.

Beyazit's mother snorted.

"What?" said Beyazit.

"Nothing," said his mother. "I had an itchy nose."

"Anyway, I suppose I shall leave you two," said Beyazit. "Please don't kill one another, and Mother, don't smother him with blankets. I would take it amiss if Ferzil died now, given we put all this effort into saving him."

"I shall look after him *ferociously*," said his mother proudly.

"I would expect nothing less," said Ferzil, wryly.

Beyazit walked out, followed by Kadri, when he suddenly realised he'd left his stole on the chair. "I'll get it for you," said Kadri.

"No need," said Beyazit, leaping up the steps two at a time, and going through the parlour back into his mother's lounge.

“—the problem is, May,” Ferzil was saying to his mother, “that Hala finds Femi unbearable, so we’ll have to ensure that—” He broke off as he saw Beyazit, and bowed from his seat.

“I forgot my stole,” said Beyazit, fascinated by this insight into the rivalry between his concubines. He hadn’t ever noticed that Hala disliked Femi.

“So you did. You are a very silly scatty boy,” scolded his mother, and leapt up, picked up the stole and stuffed it in his arms.

“I am the Emperor of Harad,” said Beyazit. “You can’t call me a silly scatty boy, mother.”

“Yes, I can,” said his mother. “I wiped your bottom betimes, did you know? I did not leave that duty *only* to my maids.”

“Escape while you can, Celestial Emperor, before she starts telling you more,” advised Ferzil, smiling gently.

Beyazit walked back up the hill with Kadri. He was outside his own apartments when something occurred to him. “Huh. I heard Ferzil call my mother *May*, just before?”

Kadri shrugged, his eyes hooded. “He must have gotten in the habit while he was unwell.”

“True,” said Beyazit. “That must be the explanation. Anyway, I must speak to you over how to deal with the Second Trade Secretary—”

“Of course, Celestial One,” said Kadri. “I think what we do is—”