

Roxelana the cat

Kadri had, with some difficulty, reconciled himself to the fact that he had made an alliance with the Empress Mother. But, he considered, there were *limits* to what he would accept. He marched down to the Empress Mother's apartments, and went into the study. Unfortunately, the Empress Mother was not there, but Eunuch Ferzil was, and that was almost as good.

"I wish," said Kadri, "to register a *complaint*."

Ferzil glanced up from his writing and smiled serenely at Kadri. "Very well. Just let me finish writing my sentence, Chief Eunuch."

Kadri stood there while Ferzil carefully finished his sentence, then wiped his stylus with a cloth and placed it down. Then Ferzil swiveled around, still on his knees, and looked at Kadri. "What manner of complaint? I thought things had calmed since the Empress Mother's brother Parizad Khan had been sent away to marry?"

"Deputy Chief Eunuch, it is about *that cat*."

Ferzil's face shadowed. "Ah. *That cat*. Yes. What did she do to you now?"

"She *bit* my ankle, and when I tried to remove her from my ankle, she clawed me," Kadri reported. He pulled up his silk trousers and showed the evidence. "Look! It is swollen! She bit my flesh!"

Ferzil leaned over and inspected the ankle carefully. "I would put balm on that. The midwives gave me something which deals quite well with scratches and bites." He held out his own hands. "You see, I have my own difficulties."

Kadri looked at Ferzil's large, brown hands. They were striped with scratches. "*That cat* attacks *you* too?"

Ferzil sighed and ground his teeth together. "She does."

"But you are the one who brought Roxelana to the harem!" Kadri exclaimed, pulling down his trousers. "Does she have no gratitude?"

"No," sighed Ferzil. "None at all."

"But you are ... you are ... the Empress Mother's ..." Kadri floundered, and knelt to cover up his confusion.

Ferzil's eyebrows quirked up. "... Eunuch?"

This wasn't quite the word Kadri had in mind, but everyone had mostly given up on trying to make Ferzil admit the truth. "Yes—"

"I suspect this is a further reason for Roxelana to resent me: I take attention away from her. And ... well—" Ferzil coloured and looked around the room.

"What?" said Kadri.

"*She tries to push me out of bed,*" hissed Ferzil. "She stretches, and kneads me with her paws, and bats my face, in the small hours of the morning—"

"She tries to take your place?" Kadri was shocked but also titillated: finally Ferzil was implicitly admitting that he slept in the Empress Mother's bed.

"It is *most annoying*. So I do sympathise with your predicament, and your wounds, but I am not sure what I can do about it."

"You can tell the Empress Mother to get rid of the cat?" said Kadri, hopefully.

Ferzil shook his head. "No. I have tried and tried. And she will not listen to me on this."

"But if she won't listen to you—?" said Kadri.

"—then there is nothing else anyone can do!" Ferzil looked glum. "I don't know *what* I was thinking. I simply thought: here is a sweet little kitten—the prettiest of the litter—her mother is a good mouser, and so our mouse problem will be dealt with. Little did I know I was inviting a demon into the harem."

Then they quieted as someone knocked on the door. "Come in," called Ferzil.

To Kadri's surprise it was the Emperor. "Celestial Emperor, may you live forever," he and Ferzil intoned, and they prostrated themselves on the floor.

The Emperor looked at them with narrow eyes. "You were gossiping. Don't tell me you weren't!"

Kadri put his head on the side, and Ferzil looked at Kadri, and then they both shrugged.

"We might have been," said Ferzil.

"Ah!" said Kadri. "Our Celestial Emperor might be able to help us with the subject of our gossip!"

The Emperor perked up. "Do tell me!"

"Dear Emperor, you can command the foul beast to be exiled!" exclaimed Kadri. He stood again, and exhibited the wounded ankle to the Emperor. "Your Radiant Mother's cat! It bit me!"

The Emperor leaned over and looked moodily at Kadri's ankle. "Ah. Chief Eunuch. I am so very sorry to hear this. It is indeed a foul beast. Did you know it got into my leopards' cage?"

Ferzil sighed, and stood too. "'Tis a pity that they did not eat her."

"It was much worse than that, Deputy Chief Eunuch," said the Emperor. "That beast *terrified* my leopards and herded them all into one corner of their cage with its hissing and yowling."

"Damn," said Ferzil. "We can't accidentally-on-purpose drop the cat into the leopard cage one day? It is something I have fantasized about, particularly in the middle of the night when that creature comes to my bed and scratches me."

The Emperor burst out laughing. "Very dry, Ferzil, very dry."

Ferzil grimaced and showed the back of his hands. "It wasn't a joke, Celestial One. I would seriously consider it. My hands are lacerated."

"Can you exile it, Beloved Emperor?" pleaded Kadri. "To Khand? Or Gondor? Or to the fabled land of the Halflings? Do they eat cats in Halfling land?"

"Umma would never forgive me." The Emperor brightened and turned to Ferzil. "If anyone knows how to get rid of the feline demon of the seven hells, it's you, Ferzil? After all, you brought it upon us in the first place."

Ferzil shook his head sadly. "I was just telling the Chief Eunuch that I have tried, and to my immense sorrow and utmost regret, I have been unsuccessful. I am most humiliated by my unworthy failure."

"O damn," said the Emperor. "If you can't make Umma get rid of the horrid beast, no one can."

"This is precisely what I just concluded too," said Kadri. "He's the only one who can get your mother to do anything."

Ferzil's cheeks darkened with a blush. "Thank you. I do have my limits, however."

"Where is Umma anyway?" said the Emperor, looking around.

"Visiting the concubines," said Ferzil, promptly. "Murat's accompanying her today. She should be back soon."

The Emperor hissed and pointed at the other doorway. "Speak of the hell beast and it appears! It is *listening* to us."

Indeed, when Kadri and Ferzil turned, they saw the russet cat in the doorway, her triangular face still, her golden eyes narrowed, and her tail lashing.

Ferzil rose and waved his hands at the cat. "Shoo! Shoo, Roxelana! Go away! What do you mean by biting my honored brother Kadri?"

Roxelana ignored Ferzil entirely until he got within reach. Then she leaped up and grabbed Ferzil's hands with her claws and bit him.

"Ow! Ow!" Ferzil capered around, the cat hanging off his hands. "Foul beast! Demon of the pits of Sauron! Get off me!"

The Emperor burst out laughing. Kadri had to confess, it was funny. He stifled a giggle.

"What are you doing to my cat, Ferzil?" said a cool, female voice from the other entrance.

The cat immediately dropped from Ferzil's hands, and made a beeline for the Empress Mother.

Ferzil narrowed his eyes at the Empress Mother. "It is not a question of what I am doing to your cat. It is a question of what your cat is *doing to me*! And Kadri! And, well, anyone other than you, Amaya!"

"She bit me too the other week," confessed Murat, from behind the Empress Mother.

The Empress Mother picked up the cat, and stroked it. The cat started to purr like a small rumbling rockfall. "Roxy is a darling."

Ferzil marched up to her and wagged a finger. "Only to you, Amaya. To anyone else, this cat is a menace. It must go! It bit me just now! You saw it!"

The cat hissed at him from the Empress Mother's arms, and made a burbling yowl.

"O, is nasty Ferzi being mean to you, Roxy?" said the Empress Mother, stroking the cat, and kissing the top of its head. She pushed back her head scarf and looked limpidly at Ferzil. "You must confess that the mouse problem has reduced since you gave me Roxelana. A very precious gift!"

Ferzil pouted. "She is an excellent mouser. For that I cannot fault her. It is the fact that she also attacks everyone else as well—"

"—She even attacked my leopards, Umma!" exclaimed the Emperor.

The Empress Mother beamed at the cat. "O, did you Roxy? Did you put those silly leopards in their place?"

"She terrified them!" said the Emperor.

"The fault lies with the leopards, not my cat. If they are unable to defend themselves from one little cat, then they are too fat and lazy, Beyazit," said the Empress Mother, tartly. "You spoil them."

"Figs don't fall far from the tree," muttered Ferzil, darkly, at the Empress Mother.

"But *my darling cat* is not fat and lazy, Ferzil," said the Empress Mother.

Ferzil put his hands on his hips. "She is awful! She bites and scratches me! She attacks me in bed at night!"

The Empress Mother swept past all of them, the cat in her arms. "We are leaving all these mean people behind, Roxy, and going upstairs! I shall feed you some preserved fish."

The three eunuchs and the Emperor listened as the Empress Mother's footsteps progressed up the stairs.

"Well, you tried—?" The Emperor spread his hands to Ferzil. "I have offered before, Ferzil, and I will offer again. If living with my mother and her hell cat becomes too difficult, you are welcome to lodgings near Kadri's, in the main palace?"

Ferzil lowered his eyes. "Thank you, Emperor. At the moment I am considering going back to live in Alazit with my family, to be honest."

The Emperor looked alarmed. "Please—don't! I would rather exile Umma and her horrid cat than lose you, Deputy Chief Eunuch. If it's between her and *that cat*, and you, you win! Why Umma had to free you, I don't know. I would have vastly preferred you to be unable to leave."

"Don't believe him, Celestial One," said Kadri, smugly. "He's not going to leave. I doubt he will even leave these apartments?"

Ferzil shot Kadri a glare. "You don't know that."

"I do," said Kadri.

"Humph," said Ferzil, fiddling with the ring on his right hand.

"I really don't know how you put up with her," said the Emperor.

"I heard that, Beyazit," said the Empress Mother, ominously, from the bottom of the stairs: she had evidently taken off her shoes and padded silently back down, as she was wont to do. It was one of the many alarming things about her, Kadri reflected. He wondered if she'd used this skill previously, and resolved to ask Ferzil more. He was reasonably sure that Ferzil knew exactly *what had happened* and how it had been achieved, but winking it out of him was the hard part.

Meanwhile the Emperor yelled in the general direction of his mother's voice. "Good! *Good!* I'm glad you heard, Umma!" Then he paused. "I might have been talking about the cat, anyway! But, for the avoidance of doubt, I was indeed talking about *you*! I don't know how Ferzil bears you!"

The Empress Mother glided back into the room on bare feet, took Ferzil's arm, and batted her eyelids teasingly at him. "Ferzil puts up with me because he *loves* me!"

"I do not," grumbled Ferzil, pulling his arm away swiftly, and scowling at her. "You and your cat are awful, Amaya. You are suited to one another. Like attracts like."

The Emperor laughed. "You two have the strangest—I don't even know what I would call it? You seem to love hating each other."

"We have spent many a long hour trying to figure out how their relationship works," said Kadri.

"It doesn't," glowered Ferzil.

"If you don't get the cat under control, I shall exile it to Gondor, anyway, Umma," said the Emperor, briskly, in a tone Kadri knew meant business. "And, if you're not careful, I shall send you with it. Maybe even to Arnor."

The Empress Mother looked sulky. "That won't be necessary, son. I'll restrain Roxy."

"Very well," said the Emperor. "I am leaving now. But I came down here because I need a harem scribe—"

"Kadri and I need to put balm on our cat-inflicted injuries," said Ferzil, looking at Murat.

Murat nodded, and bowed. "Celestial Emperor, I shall serve you gladly."

The Emperor and Murat left.

"Where's that balm, anyway?" said Kadri. "My ankle stings."

"In the next room in my desk," sighed Ferzil. "Round glass container with a blue lid, second drawer. Almost half finished, already!"

Kadri went to Ferzil's desk. It was of course, meticulously neat and spartan, and the balm was easy to find. He sat on the floor and slathered the balm over his bitten ankle: it had a pleasant herbal smell.

Then he went back to the lounge, where he was delighted to catch the Empress Mother embracing a sulky-looking Ferzil, murmuring something in his ear. There was lip-paint on Ferzil's cheek. Kadri could not wait to tell the other eunuchs. They delighted in catching the couple in such moments, and particularly savoured the terrible excuses they made.

"Argh!" Ferzil jumped away from Amaya, as Kadri came back in.

"I'm just, er, ah ... *apologising* ... for, uh, teasing him," said the Empress Mother, her cheeks very red. Kadri mentally filed that one away. It wasn't as bad as, "She tripped when we were walking around the lake, and just kind of fell onto me, and I had to catch her in my arms," which rated as one of the worst excuses Kadri had heard. He still thought that the worst was, "He had to lie down in my bed and take off his shirt because he had a sore back, so I massaged him." Murat had been the one who'd received that particularly fine and unconvincing excuse.

"Sure, sure!" Kadri grinned at her. "You never apologise to *me* with kisses?"

The Empress Mother made a kissing noise, and leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with malice. "If you really want me to, I could kiss you better, Chief Eunuch Kadri?"

"Ugh, no!" said Kadri. "I don't want lip paint all over *my* cheek."

The Empress Mother laughed. Meanwhile, Ferzil wiped the lip-paint off his cheek with a handkerchief, glaring at them both.

"Here's the balm anyway." Kadri held it out, and to his surprise, the Empress Mother took it from him.

"It's hard to put balm on your own hands," she murmured to Kadri, by way of explanation.

"I can manage, May," said Ferzil, grumpily, but held out his hands anyway.

The Empress Mother carefully rubbed balm onto the bites and scratches. "I will consider how to stop Roxy waking you in the night. It's annoying for me too, because you wake me when you leap out of bed, and shout. She likes you because you're nice and warm, Ferzi. You need to be less pleasant to snuggle?"

Kadri burst out laughing.

"Shh," said Ferzil, turning puce.

"O by the gods," said Kadri. "We all know you sleep in the same bed. I have seen you both in there, fast asleep, betimes!"

"It is my nightmares," said the Empress Mother, shyly. "For whatever reason, I find that I have them less when someone else is there."

"Did you creep up on him?" whispered Kadri. "When you ... did what you did?"

"No," said the Empress Mother, haltingly. "All I will say—I didn't do what everyone thinks I did."

"You *can't* leave it at that!" said Kadri.

"Yes, she can," said Ferzil, fiercely, taking the Empress Mother's hand, and stroking it. "I don't want *both* the cat and Amaya waking me up tonight; it will happen if we speak of this further."

The Empress Mother passed her hand over her brow. "I have a headache."

"I will put this balm away and then take you upstairs," said Ferzil.

After they left, Kadri crept up the stairs to hear what was going on, but shortly thereafter Ferzil came back, and caught him on the stairs.

"Kadri!" he said, shaking his head.

"You can't blame me," said Kadri. "You won't tell us anything."

"Come downstairs," said Ferzil. Then he leaned close to Kadri and said, "Pillow."

"Pillow?" said Kadri, with confusion. "She needs another pillow?"

"No! She couldn't bear to see ... his agony."

"O!" Kadri looked narrowly at Ferzil. "I would have enjoyed his agony, personally, and watched him writhe."

"Did you know that Roxelana is very efficient? She doesn't play with the mice? Just dispatches them, *crunch*. That's unusual for a cat, isn't it?" Ferzil looked thoughtful, then frowned. "I do hope she doesn't awaken me again tonight. I am an utter fool for bringing a hell beast in our midst."

Kadri slapped Ferzil on the back. "Face the truth, my brother eunuch. You attract crazed vicious hell beasts."

Ferzil grinned back. "The point is granted, Kadri."