

Beyazit confronts his mother

Emperor Beyazit II felt grumpy, and hence he decided to visit his favourite consort Tima in the harem for comfort. She was the mother of six of his children, including his eldest son, Timur. Her eunuch Zahel ran to fetch her.

“Bey!” said Tima, coming into the front hall, and embraced him, smiling.

Beyazit kissed her cheek, then her neck and her shoulder. Tima laughed. “So it’s like that, is it?”

“Yes, my darling silly dumpling,” said Beyazit, nuzzling her warm, soft shoulder.

Tima turned to the younger children. “Emperor-Baba and I are just going upstairs.”

“But will Emperor-Baba come and play with us?” said the children.

“I definitely will,” said Beyazit, hugging them all. “Meanwhile, I brought you special cakes!” He gave the cakes to Eunuch Zahel and the children crowded around him, while Beyazit took Tima upstairs.

After he and Tima had made love, Beyazit said, “That was very nice as always, and I feel much less grumpy now. I suppose I should go see the children.”

Tima giggled. “I suppose so. We could have afternoon tea out on the balcony?”

“What a lovely idea,” said Beyazit. They dressed and sat out on Tima’s balcony, while Zahel organised afternoon tea. Their youngest girl, Samira, came and sat on Beyazit’s lap, and showed him a hideous brightly coloured doll, and he pretended to admire it.

“She has clothes you can take off and on,” said Samira.

“Very pretty.” Beyazit gazed out over the courtyard. His mother was walking down the garden path, followed by her eunuch shadow, Ferzil. Ferzil had been Chief Eunuch for a time, but after contracting an almost fatal lung infection, he had ceded the position to Kadri. Beyazit had been shocked when Ferzil had continued to live with his mother, despite the offer of other apartments. There had no longer been any need for it. But Beyazit had not questioned too closely, because Ferzil was extremely adept at distracting and dealing with his mother, and it was convenient that he continue to do so.

His mother stopped on the garden path, and pointed at one of the peahens, and said something: the hen had a line of new chicks trailing after her, their little head feathers bobbing. It never ceased to amaze Beyazit that his mother was sentimental about cats, chicks and grandchildren. He did not think that she had liked him particularly when he was a child. Of course, as Ferzil had pointed out to him long ago, she had *loved* him—her single-minded determination to protect him at any cost throughout his childhood was legendary—but that was quite different.

Ferzil came forward and looked at the chicks too. His mother spoke shortly to Ferzil, and they kept walking, the eunuch behind his mother, his head down.

“Ha!” said Beyazit. “Look at them! Umma and Ferzil! Hahaha! I’ve always thought that they look like an old married couple. Umma is the tall, thin, bossy husband, Ferzil is the short, fat wife trailing behind—he has the breasts for it!”

Tima laughed warmly. “Of course they look like a married couple, Bey.”

Beyazit turned to her. “What?”

Tima looked at him with wide hazel-green eyes. “Uh.” She shifted her gaze to his mother and Ferzil as they walked down the hill, and then looked back at him. “*Surely* you’ve realised by now?”

“What do you mean?” said Beyazit. “Realised *what*?”

Tima giggled, and fluttered her eyelashes at him. “Bey! Remember, I *told* you they were lovers, years ago, when I first came to the harem! Why else do you think she bought him and yet he stayed with her? They’re *actually* married!”

According to the law of Harad, Empress Mothers were not able to marry a second time, and eunuchs were not able to marry at all. Beyazit shook his head and scoffed. “It’s legally impossible for them to marry, Tima, you silly fat dumpling. And—even if it was possible—they don’t even *like* each other? They fight constantly! My mother throws shoes at Ferzil! He threatens to leave!”

Tima looked fondly at him. “Not everyone has a calm relationship like you and me, Bey. Your mother isn’t very good at expressing affection, except with grandchildren—but, just as I’ve always said, she’s got a loving heart underneath that stern exterior. Don’t you remember how she nursed Ferzil when he was sick with the lung fever?”

Beyazit was so filled with shock he couldn’t speak for a moment: he vividly recalled how his mother had mopped Ferzil’s brow, and how Ferzil had clung to her and told her he loved her. He had always presumed Ferzil had mistaken his mother for someone else in a fevered madness, as he’d been wont to do while he was unwell.

Tima kept chattering away, blithely, oblivious to his shock. “It’s all very sweet and romantic. Don’t you remember when your mother cut up her Imperial wedding dress, back before Timur was born? She made it into clothing for her and Ferzil, and painted her hands with henna. Then they went to Alazit to fetch my Umma, but when they came back, they were wearing those matching rings, so our theory is that they married in secret, in front of his family, because they live in Alazit too?” Tima put her pretty head on the side, and pursed her full lips. “I think you’re right—usually Ferzil’s the wife and your mother is the husband—? Although, during crises, maybe *he’s* more of the husband, and *she’s* more of the wife—what do you think? I’ll ask the other wives and eunuchs; we love to speculate, because of course Ferzil and your mother insist they’re not together at all—it’s so hilarious—!”

Beyazit put Samira gently on the ground and stood, blinking at the vision of his wives and the eunuchs speculating for *twenty years* about his mother and Ferzil. It was ridiculous and disgusting. “Emperor-Baba will come back and play with you later. I have to ask something.”

Samira pouted. “That’s not fair, Emperor-Baba.”

“Leave it, Bey, my love; it’s not worth making a fuss about,” said Tima. “It doesn’t hurt anyone, and it all works quite well. Samira hasn’t showed you her doll’s new blue dress yet!”

"I will be back," said Beyazit. "I won't be long. I still have to have tea with you." He kissed his children on the head and went to his mother's apartment down the hill.

Ferzil opened the door when Beyazit knocked. Beyazit looked Ferzil up and down critically. He was not sure if he believed what Tima had said. Ferzil looked just as he always did: a short dark-skinned man with a smooth, round girlish face and grey, slightly thinning curly hair. Beyazit had only rarely seen Ferzil out of his blue and gold uniform: even when he'd been very ill, he had worn standard issue dark blue cotton pyjamas. His mother frequently teased Ferzil for being very proper and formal, which Beyazit had always thought was unfair. Ferzil's only deviation from the standard uniform was the gold ring he wore on his right hand. Beyazit looked at it, and wondered.

"Is everything well, Celestial Emperor?" Ferzil said softly, in his precise tenor voice.

"I'd like to speak to my mother, Ferzil."

Ferzil bowed deeply. "Of course. I will get her."

His mother came into the parlour and kissed his cheek briskly. "My son! Greetings! Are you well?" Ferzil came in behind her, and knelt in his usual corner, his head down.

"Yes, Mother, I'm well."

Beyazit's mother had an ability no one else had: to make him feel about a finger's breadth high. Sometimes he hated it, and had considered exiling her to the country on several occasions, but she had the most exquisitely sensitive grasp of power he had ever come across. She always seemed to know when to back off and when to persist: not just with him, but with most people with whom she dealt. It had contributed to the success of his rule.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" said his mother. "Would you like tea? *Café*?"

"Uh, no thank you. I heard something and I wanted to ask you about it." Now that he was here, Beyazit was unsure how to proceed. He looked over at Ferzil, and then at his mother again.

"Son?" said his mother, questioningly, her grey eyes sharp.

"Uh, er—I was just thinking—Ferzil has been with you a long time, that's all."

His mother nodded, her face impassive. "He has."

"I serve my beloved Emperor and the Radiant Mother," murmured Ferzil: the usual obsequious eunuch formula.

Just as Beyazit began to relax—of course there was nothing to Tima's ridiculous claims!—his mother's stern face softened, and she smiled as she turned to look at the eunuch in the corner. Ferzil looked up, met her eyes, and smiled back at her, with undeniable warmth, then quickly cast his gaze down again.

Beyazit stared at them. He had no idea how he had missed this for all these years.

His mother reassumed her usual haughty expression. "Is that all you wanted to say, son? You are looking at me in oddly."

"I just thought—maybe Ferzil needs to retire? After all, you bought him out, long ago. He is freed. Why is he still here? I thought you two didn't like each other? Maybe I need to separate you—"

His mother's eyes widened with horror. "No! No, I beg of you! Ferzil has learned to endure my foibles. It would take me twenty years to train someone else!"

As his mother wrung her elegant, thin hands with distress, Beyazit looked at the etched gold ring on the ring finger of her right hand. He'd always presumed it was from his father—his mother had told him it was her 'wedding ring'—but for the first time he realised that Tima was right, and the ring was similar in pattern and style to the one the eunuch wore. The idea that the pair considered themselves 'married' was extremely ridiculous.

"It has been a pleasure to serve you, Radiant Mother." Ferzil inched forward from his corner, and put his forehead on the floor, his arms outstretched. "Celestial Emperor, please, I implore you, with all my heart—in your grace, let me continue to serve your mother—my life will not be worth living if I cannot."

"Are neither of you ... bored of the other? You do not irritate each other too much?" This was as close as Beyazit could get to asking them outright.

"No! No!" chorused his mother and Ferzil, immediately.

"Hmm." Beyazit was faintly horrified that this had been going on under his nose for years, involving his *mother* of all people. A part of him wanted to put a stop to it. "I have to think about this. Maybe a change would be good for both of you? Anyway, I will go now."

"I will show you out, Celestial Emperor." Ferzil led Beyazit out and bowed deeply. "One thousand blessings rain down upon you." Then he walked back towards the parlour hastily, quite out of keeping with his normal sedate and calm manner.

Beyazit stared after Ferzil, his curiosity awakened. He quietly followed the eunuch, and watched through a crack in the parlour door. Ferzil had run to his mother, and was clinging to her. The most ruthless woman Beyazit had ever known—a woman who had stood dried-eyed through the funeral of her own father—made a sudden terrible keening noise, like a wounded animal, and buried her face in the eunuch's breasts. The hair on Beyazit's arms stood up.

"I won't let my son take you from me, Ferzi!" his mother wailed into the eunuch's chest.

To Beyazit's immense shock, Ferzil pushed back his mother's shawl and patted her hair, then kissed her on the head, tears rolling down his round cheeks. "I will die first, May."

His mother put her head up and kissed Ferzil on the lips. "I will die without you, my beloved husband." She began to wail again, and the eunuch began to sob uncontrollably.

Beyazit backed out, feeling disgusted but also faintly unclean, and walked slowly back to Tima and the children, as he reassessed and reassembled everything he knew about his mother and Ferzil.

"Well?" said Tima, as Samira ran off to fetch her doll's other dress.

"I couldn't ask her directly, but you're right," said Beyazit. "I did suggest that, well, maybe Ferzil needed to be separated from Umma? They got ... a little upset."

Tima stared at him. "Bey! Ferzil would kill himself rather than leave your mother."

"That is, in fact, what he said." Beyazit paused. "They were both crying when I left. Now I feel bad."

"Your mother is a big girl. She can look after herself," said Tima.

"She was wailing like I'd speared her in the gut," said Beyazit. "It was awful. She said she'd die without him."

"Well, you're not going to do it, are you, Bey?" Tima scowled, putting her hands on her curvaceous hips. "It would be cruel! You're not that nasty! You love Ferzil as much as we do—and your mother's a sweet lady. She *made* the blue dress for Samira's doll, with her own hands."

"I did not know she could sew," said Beyazit, with shock.

"Her friend taught her!"

"She doesn't *have* any friends, apart from her maids, Ferzil and the eunuchs, and the crazy Westrons. I don't think even her family likes her much, from the the time I went to Amrun—?"

"It was that lady from Gondor!" Tima beamed. "The tall one, who's married to the Ambassador!"

"That figures. If anyone was to display an unexpected ability to sew, of course, it would be *that* insane woman. Along with several other unexpected abilities: speaking Haradric like a native, riding mûmakil, and strangling people with her bare hands."

"She's always seemed *nice*, albeit a little unusual, when I've seen her visiting your mother," said Tima. "They giggle like girls. It's so good to see."

"They are likely talking about people they have stabbed to death, both figuratively and literally," said Beyazit, glumly.

"Actually, I think they're talking about sex," said Tima with immense satisfaction. "It's just a feeling I have, from the way they laugh and carry on."

Beyazit put his fingers in his ears. "O gods, Tima. Gods, *no*! Surely Umma does not—with—? And the Gondorim woman knows—?" He took his fingers out of his ears. "What would they do anyway?"

Tima shrugged, entirely unconcerned. "I mean, there are ways, Bey—we think that they—"

To Beyazit's intense relief this line of conversation was cut off, because Samira came running back in with the doll's dress. It was made of blue silk, inexpertly sewed together with large, irregular stitches, and had crystal beads sewn on it. "Grand-umma *made* it all by herself! Arima had one for her doll, and I said I liked it, so Grand-umma made one for me too!"

Beyazit inspected it, thinking that perhaps he did not really know his mother as well as he thought. "It is very beautiful."

He drank his tea, played with the children, then kissed Tima and the children farewell. On the way back to his own rooms, he stopped at his mother's apartment.

Ferzil came to the door when he knocked, and cringed as he saw Beyazit, terror in his big brown eyes.

"Do not fear: I'm not going to take you away from her, Ferzil—" Beyazit got no further because the eunuch sat with a thump on the step, and wept loudly and unashamedly, like a child, his hands over his face.

His mother came out into the hall. Her eyes were swollen and bloodshot, but she had outlined them freshly with kohl in an attempt to hide it, and she glared fiercely at Beyazit. "What have you done to my Ferzil, son?"

"All I said was that he could stay with you if he wanted—"

His mother knelt on the floor, and embraced Ferzil's stooped shoulders, tears making black lines of kohl run in streaks down her face. "Thank you, my son. Thank you."