

# The Scorpion of Amrun

His Celestial and Radiant Majesty, Emperor Bezayzit the III, unifier of the emirates of Harad with the full blessings of heaven, known otherwise to his friends and relatives by his birth name of Amon, was in a treasury meeting.

A slave came in with a serious face, and whispered to him, "Your grandmother is dying. She asks for you."

Amon stood. "I'm sorry Khans and gentlemen. We will have to postpone this meeting for the moment. My grandmother calls for me on her deathbed."

The other participants in the meeting turned to him and cast their gazes down.

"We are sorry to hear this, Celestial Emperor," said the Treasurer.

"Thank you," said Amon. "But she is very old, and it will be release rather than a sorrow."

Then he walked down the hill with his usual retinue of servants, to the harem where he had grown up. As he walked, he thought of his grandmother. When he was a child, he had adored her. Grand-umma had been far more lenient than any of his mothers, and had let him and his siblings do crazy things like have sword battles in the gardens or row around on a homemade raft on the lake (much to the surprise of the water birds). She had also been a source of wonderful tales: stories of growing up in Amrun, tales of strange people from Gondor, myths, legends and history. It was only when he was an adult that he had become aware that she had an entirely different reputation among the nobility of Beyazim. Among them, she was known as the Scorpion of Amrun, and several people had ever so gently inferred to him that she had poisoned Amon's grandfather, Emperor Artabanus, when Amon's father was twelve. This impelled him to read the internal palace histories of what his grandfather was like. After that, Amon could not altogether blame his grandmother, and resolved that a good rule of thumb was this: if his grandfather had done it in a certain way, he should probably *not* do it in that way. When Amon became Emperor at the age of twenty seven, after his Emperor-Baba's unexpected death from a heart attack, his grandmother had been a well-spring of support. Whenever he was unsure, he consulted her. He had always found her advice worth listening to, even if he had not followed it.

In the last year, however, her mind had started to wander, and Amon had seen her less. Once she had been found standing out in the harem pond, in her night clothes. She had started not to recognise people, or to think that she was talking to people who were long dead. Amon felt bad, but he couldn't stand it, and hence he had made excuses to himself as to why he couldn't visit her. But now, for this last time, he would visit.

When he got there, his grandmother was lying in bed, her skin displaying the strange translucency of dying people. Her breath was laboured. Her faithful eunuch Ferzil, himself an old man, knelt there, holding her hand. Amon had been told Ferzil had not been sleeping because he feared that Grand-umma would die without him there.

Amon knelt on her other side, and watched her. Her hair was white and wispy, and her cheeks sunken. Suddenly she opened her eyes, the grey faded and dull, and looked at him.

"Firooz?" she said. "Is that Firooz, Ferzi?"

"No," said the eunuch patiently from the other side of the bed. "It is your grandson Amon."

His grandmother closed her eyes, and Amon mouthed, "Who is Firooz?"

"My late brother," murmured the eunuch. "He had a beard too, and his skin tone was similar to yours and mine."

"Ah," said Amon, and wondered why his grandmother was thinking of her eunuch's brother. He had not known that she knew anyone from Ferzil's family, nor that Ferzil had had a brother.

His grandmother opened her eyes again. "Amon, my darling!" she said, breathily, and beamed, recognising him this time. "Such a handsome boy you are! When did you get here?"

"Just now," said Amon, and took her hand.

"I am so happy to see you!" Then she looked around in a worried fashion. "But where is Beyazit? Where is my only and best beloved son? He should be here, to say goodbye to his Umma."

Amon gulped. His father had been dead for over thirty years. Ferzil glanced at Amon and said, "He's coming, Amaya. He'll be here soon."

"O good," said his grandmother, her Horondor accent thickening. "I haven't seen him for some time. He never visits me any more. I hope he is not thinking of exiling me again?"

"He is most definitely not thinking about exiling you again," said Amon. "He loves you." He felt no guilt about saying this, as it was true that his father's last word, when he had the heart attack, had been 'Umma!'

"We did it for Beyazit and Harad, you know," said his grandmother, seriously, to Amon. "That's why."

"Amaya—" said the eunuch.

"But you know we did, Ferzil. I told you. I didn't administer the poison: that was Parvaz and Sanaz. I just finished it off, because he was so sick, and it was awful." Tears started to run down his grandmother's cheeks. "Fereshtah told me that mad dogs had to be put down, that was the code. After they poisoned him, Bijaan held Artabanus down, and I held the pillow to his face until he stopped struggling. Fereshtah said to stop feeling guilty, that he would have died a long and painful death, and that it was good for Harad."

"To be honest, it probably was good for Harad," said Amon.

His grandmother smiled through the tears. "You think so, Amon? That makes me feel better: I have felt bad for so long. You are an excellent boy. I am so proud of you."

Amon felt tears well. "Thank you Grand-umma."

"Of course, Ferzi is my best boy of all," said his grandmother, and turned her head slightly to look at Ferzil. "Wouldn't it be nice if we could make love one last time, my heart?" She sighed.

"May!" said the eunuch, and glanced with horror at Amon.

"Uh," said Amon. His grandmother and her eunuch had slept in the same bed for as long as he could remember, and wore matching rings, but he and his siblings had chosen quite deliberately not to think too hard about what exactly their relationship was.

"Surely you realised, Amon?" said his grandmother, impatiently, turning her head back toward him. "Ferzi has been my husband in all but name, for fifty years. I pledged myself to him in front of his parents, before you were even born."

To Amon's immense discomfort, the eunuch started to weep. "My beloved. My darling May. I cannot bear to lose you. You are my life." Then he put his face down on his grandmother's shoulder and they clasped hands.

"When Ferzi dies, I want you to mix his ashes with mine," said his grandmother conversationally, in a wheezing voice, as Ferzil wept and clung to her hands. "I don't want to be apart from my love for too long! If you put his ashes with mine, we will always be together."

"Er," said Amon.

"You have to promise me," said his grandmother, with a spark of her normal asperity. "I'm dying. I won't be able to ask tomorrow, you know."

Ferzil sat up, let go of Amon's grandmother's hands, and folded his hands in a position of supplication, tears running down his lined cheeks as he stared at Amon.

"Very well," said Amon. "I promise."

His grandmother beamed. "There! Didn't I tell you he was a very good boy, Ferzi? I told you he'd let us be together. Now I can go in peace."

"I don't want you to go, my beloved," said Ferzil in a choked voice.

"I know, but there's no use crying over it, my heart," said his grandmother, quietly. "You were always the soppy one out of the two of us."

She closed her eyes again, and they waited anxiously, watching her chest rise and fall. Then she opened her eyes, and spoke in a Horondor brogue, her voice that of a scared little girl. "Can you hold my hand, so I don't feel alone? And Ferzi, can you sing the song to me?"

"Which song?" said Ferzil. They each took a hand, and sat and waited as his grandmother took labouring breaths.

Finally his grandmother spoke with difficulty. "The one you sang ... when we ... became lovers." Ferzil glanced at Amon sidelong, and Amon shrugged: it hardly mattered now.

Softly the eunuch began to sing. His voice was old and crackly, but Amon remembered what his singing had been like when he was young man. It must have been a glorious performance, back then.

"Again," said his grandmother very quietly, with great difficulty, when Ferzil finished. Her eyes had closed again.

Ferzil began again. Halfway through the song, Amon noticed his grandmother's chest was no longer rising and falling and was not sure whether to interrupt. But then he felt his grandmother's hand slacken in his, and looked at the eunuch.

The eunuch gave a great keening wail. "No! Amaya!" Then he threw himself on the bed, over his grandmother, wailing and hitting himself.

Amon bent over and kissed his grandmother's forehead. "Goodbye, Grand-umma. I love you." Then he patted the eunuch's shoulder, but he did not think old Ferzil registered it. He could not bear being in the room with them.

So he left and went back to the palace, and went and shut himself in his room with his favourite leashed leopard, who purred and rubbed her head on his cheek as he cried. He was going to have to tell his many brothers and sisters, but he wasn't ready to write them letters yet.

An hour later there was a knock at the door.

"What?" said Amon, with irritation.

A slave came in. "Celestial Emperor, I am afraid that Eunuch Ferzil took a large dose of hemlock. Then he lay down on the bed with your grandmother and refused to get up."

"He is dead too, then?" said Amon.

"He is," said the slave.

Then the Grand Vizier came in looking worried. "Your Majesty, I just heard the terrible news about your grandmother and the old eunuch."

"We shall have a very small funeral for them both," said Amon. "They were not public people."

"No, very much not," said the Grand Vizier. "I would go so far as to say: reclusive."

"She told me that she didn't poison my grandfather, you know," said Amon.

The Grand Vizier's grey eyebrows rose. "She *didn't*?"

"No. Who were Parvaz, Fereshtah and Sanaz again?" said Amon. "I get all those Northern relatives confused: I never really knew them. Anyway, it was them."

"I suspect Houmayoun Khan was the ultimate planner, then," said the Grand Vizier. "Those people were your grandmother's aunts and uncles, and he was your great-great-grandfather. He was known to make or break Emperors. A great survivor."

"It's times like this I'm glad I got a good dose of Southern friendliness from Hehet Umma," said Amon. "O, and my grandmother made a last request. She wants her ashes to be mixed with Ferzil's."

The Grand Vizier blinked. "Is that proper?"

“Probably not,” said Amon, deciding not to enlighten the Grand Vizier as to his grandmother’s deathbed revelations. “But I can’t go back on a promise to a dying grandmother, can I? I command it done. She was not a person who cared about what was proper, anyway.”

“No, not really,” said the Grand Vizier. “I still remember the time three years ago, before she started declining, when she came down here and dressed me down for a decision I made.”

“The worst of it was: I bet she had a point,” said Amon. “She generally did.”

“She did,” said the Grand Vizier, morosely. “I did not admit that to her, of course. I might whisper to her ashes that she was right?”

“Very good,” said Amon. “And so passes the Scorpion of Amrun. A much more complex woman than rumour has it.”

“Indeed,” said the Grand Vizier.