

The Grand Vizier Investigates

Ihy was annoyed when his secretary shook him awake. “Kawab, what is it?”

Kawab’s dark eyes were wide. “Sir—Sir—they say that the Emperor—that he’s *dead*?”

Ihy swore. “Flaming hounds of Sauron!” Kawab winced: it was generally unacceptable to swear by Sauron these days. Ihy didn’t care: he felt it was excusable in the circumstances.

“Get my valet to dress me, now!” he snapped, as he rolled hurriedly out of bed, throwing off the covers.

While his valet came in, Kawab filled him in. “So—the Emperor had dinner with Parvaz Pasha, Oryxates Khan and Youtar Khan last night—”

“His Army buddies,” sighed Ihy. “They drank much?”

“Aye, they went hunting, first. The Emperor, may he live—no, may his shade be blessed—looked flushed and uncomfortable after the ride, and was struggling for breath.”

“He’s so fat and unfit these days: he really should not be pretending he is still—” Ihy broke off.

“Then they had grilled meat in the pavilion. They drank white and red wine, spirits, smoked hashish, tobacco and poppy.”

Ihy slapped his forehead. “All of that together?”

“Yes,” confirmed Kawab. “Oryxates Khan and Youtar Khan had to be guided home. They were both sick on the way home. Parvaz Pasha drank so much he was ... he was sick *in the pavilion*—”

Ihy grimaced. “And was our Emperor sick too?”

“Aye, but not in the pavilion. He stumbled back to his quarters, and was sick there—”

Ihy was starting to get a headache. “By the gods, I told him not to—”

“I know you told him to drink less, but there’s no telling him—” Kawab sympathised. “Anyway, then he called for the Radiant Consort.”

Ihy straightened up, his eyes narrowed. “He called for Amaya?”

“Just so. She came, with the Chief Eunuch in tow. Then she left.”

“Was our Glorious Emperor alive when she left?” Ihy rubbed his curled, oiled beard thoughtfully.

“Er, the guards say yes. They say he, er, attempted to have sex with her. Then she left. She was entirely calm and normal. She did say he’d passed out.”

Ihy was immediately suspicious. “Right. I see.”

“So—he looked fine, when the servants came back in. He was sleeping in his cushions. You know how he never likes to be disturbed when he’s been on a bender?”

“Alas.” Ihy frowned.

“Then someone noticed he hadn’t changed position, and his skin was somewhat blue. He was lying in that strange way he does, partly on his stomach, his head to the side. Someone checked. He was ... cold, Grand Vizier. Not totally cold, but very much dead.”

Ihy thought as the valet finished dressing him. Amaya and Bijaan were his immediate main suspects. He just wondered how they’d managed it. Then he said, “Take me down to the Emperor’s rooms.”

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The Emperor’s chamber was a mess. It stank of vomit, piss and shit. Clearly the Emperor had vomited everywhere, and more besides. The Emperor still lay on his bed, although slightly at an angle. Someone had draped a feminine looking scarf over his face. The Emperor’s vast bulk was half naked, and his trousers were around his knees. Someone had also tactfully put a cushion over his genitalia.

Ihy gingerly removed the cushion first. The Emperor’s withered member lay like a forlorn worm. Ihy smelled shit: he suspected the Emperor had voided his bowels in his last moments. He swiftly put the cushion back on, and then pulled the scarf off the Emperor’s face. The Emperor’s blue eyes were half open, and staring—tiny red blood vessels in his eyes had broken—and his mouth was also partly open. His skin was discoloured and blue, almost bruised, and his lips purple. Ihy bent down and looked at his mouth. Then he grimaced. “Someone get me a stick. A spoon. Something?”

One of the nervous guards ran off and got a spoon. Ihy prised the Emperor’s jaws open, with difficulty: rigour mortis had started to set in. The Emperor’s mouth was filled with vomit, just as Ihy had suspected. He gently scooped some of it out, and sniffed it. He could not smell almonds. If poison had been used, it was not cyanide.

He inspected the Emperor’s face. The Emperor’s nose seemed to have vomit in it, and a little blood. Then Ihy undid the top of the Emperor’s shirt. There was no marks or signs of strangulation around the Emperor’s neck or chest. Amaya wouldn’t have had the strength to strangle him, anyway, unless she’d used something like the scarf; Chief Eunuch Bijaan was another matter.

He straightened. “I presume that the scarf was put over his face after death?”

“Er, yes,” said a guard. “It seemed wrong to leave him staring like that, and the Radiant Consort left this scarf on the floor last night. We put the cushion ... over his ... too?”

“I presume he was not lying like this when you found him? How was he lying?”

One of the guards said, “On his stomach, Grand Vizier. You know, that way he does?”

“Recreate it for me,” Ihy commanded.

“Is that right?” another guard said. “To touch him when he’s dead and ... like that?”

“Do it.”

The first guard sighed, and they tipped the Emperor back over, onto his face, back into the pool of vomit beside him. His buttocks were covered with dried shit, and his back was mottled with broken blood vessels. That gave Ihy a reasonable idea of time of death: it had been some hours. He commanded Kawab to draw the position of the Emperor, and to take notes.

"When did the Radiant Consort visit our Emperor?" he snapped.

"Ah, about midnight, I deem?" the second guard looked at the first guard.

"Aye, about midnight." The first guard pointed. "Guess she won't be wanting that scarf now?" The scarf had been pushed into the vomit.

"Come out into the anteroom," Ihy said.

Then he sat each of the four guards down and questioned them individually. Their stories mostly matched. The Emperor had returned from his dinner with his friends in a horrendously inebriated state. He had begun to throw up copiously. Slaves had had to wipe him down.

They all agreed that when the vomiting started to abate, the Radiant Consort turned up at the Emperor's chambers, with Chief Eunuch Bijaan.

"Said he'd called for her," said the first guard.

"Had he?" Ihy was suspicious.

The first guard blinked. "I don't rightly know. I didn't hear him call for her, but it's the kind of thing he might do?"

The second and the fourth guard didn't recall.

The third guard, on the other hand, was adamant that the Emperor had called for his Radiant Consort. "He just wants comfort when he's like that."

All the guards agreed that Amaya had looked normal.

"She was half smiling," said the fourth guard. "She looked a bit dismayed when we told her that he was drunk, but then she sighed and said she was used to it."

The guards became coy about the next part. "So—then—he tried to have sex with her, didn't he and he sent the slaves and us out, but we could hear it?" the first guard eventually confessed. "When she left, she said he couldn't actually—but then he hasn't been able to lately?"

"She was sad," said the third guard. "She said—'I don't suppose I'll be getting another son after tonight.'"

"She acts well, though," said the second guard, doubtfully. "You wouldn't guess that he couldn't—you know—from the noises she makes."

Ihy filed that thought away.

“Were there any sounds of a scuffle, or someone—perhaps—trying to strangle another person?”

The fourth guard stared. “She’s too slender to manage that? And no, the sounds were the normal sounds of ... *that*. Grunting, sighing, some whispering and soft conversation. Maybe a *bit* of rough play? But that’s what he does with her. She usually only starts to cry once she gets out here: she doesn’t like him to see it.”

“He would have screamed if anyone had tried to strangle him, no matter how drunk he was,” said the first guard, confidently. “We would have heard him. And—in a wrestling match between him and Bijaan, I don’t know who would have won? Anyway, we saw no marks on the Emperor’s neck?”

The guards agreed that Amaya and Bijaan had looked normal when they left the Emperor’s chambers. “She was still smiling in that way she does, like a half smile—” said the third guard. “She was normal. Not cackling, or triumphant, or anything.”

“I never said the Radiant Consort was a suspect,” Ihy said sharply.

“Aye, but it’s what you’re thinkin’ isn’t it?” said the third guard. “Everyone’s thinkin’ it. Cos now her son will be Emperor? And she’s beautiful, but crafty and vicious.”

“That fat emasculated creature,” said the second guard. “He didn’t look any different either. He was just like normal, the snobby bastard.”

The first guard spat. “I hate that Bijaan. But yeah, there was nothing odd about him.”

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In the harem, someone was screaming in a horrible high pitch, like fingernails across a board. Others were wailing and crying. Eunuchs were running everywhere like swarming bees. When Ihy saw one who was not, he was immediately suspicious, and confronted the man.

“What are you doing here, eunuch?”

The eunuch startled: it seemed he had been lost in thought. “I am here to assist you if you require my humble services, most noble and esteemed Grand Vizier?”

“I do not. Begone.”

The fellow immediately turned and trudged away, and Ihy put his suspicions about the fellow aside.

He got another eunuch to lead him to the Radiant Consort’s rooms, as he had never been in the harem before. Blessedly, the high-pitched shrieking had ceased, but he heard the unmistakable voice of another uncut male.

“Daughter,” rumbled the voice. “Stop!”

“Umma, umma, stop it!” pleaded a boy’s voice.

Ihy exchanged glances with Kawab. Soldiers in the scarlet livery and dragon motif of Amrun stood outside the Radiant Consort’s rooms. It struck Ihy that the livery was most appropriate: it was the colour of arterial blood.

"I am the Grand Vizier, you shall let me in," Ihy snapped, when the guards tried to block him.

Vashir Emir came out, and exchanged a long, cold look with Ihy.

"Let the man in," he said eventually, stroking his moustaches.

In the Radiant Consort's chambers, eunuchs were buzzing around, while a dark-haired woman—presumably Amaya—lay collapsed face down on a pile of cushions, her fingers clenched on them. She was sobbing in a weak way.

"Umma, please. Please stop," pleaded the new young Emperor, sitting by her, patting her shoulder. "Why won't you listen to me?"

Ihy got down on his knees to Beyazit. "Glorious Emperor, may you live forever." Then he looked at Amaya. "Radiant Consort, Amaya of Amrun, I would speak with you. It is I, Ihy the Grand Vizier—"

Amaya did not move.

One of the maids also kneeling beside her tutted. "You won't get anything out of her, Honourable Grand Vizier. She's been like this since she saw his body."

Ihy recalled what the second guard had said about Amaya being an accomplished actor. He shuffled forward among among the purple cushions strewn on the floor.

"Radiant Consort, you must tell me about last night—?"

The woman rolled over. Ihy had been told her fabled beauty, but at the moment—she was not in the least beautiful. Her face was red and swollen, and her eyes were red. "He told me he loved me!" She began to scream, the same awful wrenching sound Ihy had heard earlier. He was not quite sure whether the distress was real: she was reputed to be cold and utterly calculating. That being said, there was something hideous in her tone.

The young Emperor put his fingers in his ears and said, "Not again—"

A female voice behind them said, "O by the gods, Vashir, you need to sedate her. Why have you not done so already?"

Vashir turned, and Ihy stood to see who the woman was. A middle-aged noblewoman with light eyes, a long thin face, and a pointed nose to match stood in the doorway, accompanied by two tall young men wearing the lilies of Qom.

Vashir Emir frowned. "Are you sure, Fereshtah?"

To Ihy's shock, the woman strode over, and slapped Amaya as hard as she could across the face. Amaya immediately stopped screaming, and stood, holding her cheek.

"It is over. He is dead," she said to the woman, in strange wooden tones, almost as if she was reporting to a senior officer.

"You can't hit Umma!" said the young Emperor in shock. "Only Emperor-Baba is allowed to hit Umma, that's what Umma told me!"

"Your Emperor-Baba is dead, may his shade be blessed, as your mother has just noted," said the woman bluntly. She bowed. "Salutations, Emperor, may you live for ever."

"That is not funny," said the young Emperor.

"It wasn't intended to be a joke," said the woman, as Amaya collapsed onto her in an apparent swoon. Scorn covered her face, as she tried to hold Amaya up. "O, do buck up, Amaya! Death happens to us all!"

One of the young men in the doorway said, "Umma, her husband died. She's allowed to be upset?"

"He was much older than her, overweight and drank too much. It's not like it was much of a surprise," said the woman briskly, patting Amaya's back in a motherly kind of fashion. "Was it a heart attack?"

"Choked on vomit, as far as I can see," said Ihy. "Although I have not ruled out other causes? The food and drink consumed last night is yet to be tested—"

Vashir narrowed his grey eyes, very similar to his daughter's, and looked around the room melodramatically. "Suspicious. Very suspicious."

"It might be, but for the fact that my Parvaz has been puking his guts up all night. I bet his other stupid friends are ill too," sighed the long-nosed woman. "I'll tan his backside and make it into a saddle when he stops puking."

"We've prepared the poppy syrup," said one of the maids, with a glance at Ihy.

"Give it to her." Ihy shook his head. "I don't think I'll get much out of her in *this* state."

"I will only take it if my son sits beside me." Amaya hiccupped, pulling away from the woman, and pulled the boy to her. "Don't leave me, Beyazit. Hold my hand as I sleep."

"If you want, Umma," said the boy Emperor, doubtfully. "What is wrong with you?"

"Shock," said Kawab, unexpectedly.

Ihy watched as the maids settled Amaya into the bed, and the boy Emperor sat beside her, holding her hand. She was breathing in a panicked, hysterical fashion. Gradually the woman's breathing slowed and her eyes fluttered shut. Eventually she was asleep.

"It just goes to show you, Vashir," said the long-nosed woman, folding her arms. "You think a girl is level-headed and competent—and then she does *this*."

"I never made the mistake of thinking she was sensible," grunted Vashir.

Ihy turned to the long-nosed woman. "You are associated with the house of Qom?"

The long-nosed woman eyed him, and smoothed down her shalwaar kameez. "And who might you be?"

"This is Ihy Khan, the Honourable Grand Vizier," said Vashir, a note of warning in his tone.

"Ah." The woman got down and made just the right level of bow. Then she rose again. "Fereshtah of Qom, at your service. Wife of Parvaz Pasha."

"The late Emperor's drinking companion?" said Ihy.

"The very same." Fereshtah shook her head. "Parvaz will be so upset when he hears what's happened. He's out cold, now he's finished puking—I believe Artabanus persuaded him into smoking poppy."

"I've never seen Baba so sick," offered the other young man at the door, and Ihy realised he had the same long nose as his mother.

"Your sons?" said Ihy.

"Two of them," said Fereshtah.

"Mehdi Khan, at your service," said the long-nosed one, bowing.

"And Turan Khan," said the other, bowing in turn, and then grinning like a hunting dog.

"I shall come back to your lodgings with you." Ihy was filled with suspicion. The sudden appearance of Amaya's relatives, and her inability to answer his questions seemed very serendipitous.

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Outside the harem, a young, handsome man with grey eyes paced back and forth, accompanied by a younger man. He bore a badge of Amrun on his jacket.

"Dari!" said one of the Qom boys. Ihy had already forgotten which one he was.

"Turan!" said the man, wringing his hands. "What, by the gods, is going on? No one will tell me? They were saying the Emperor has been *killed*, may he—may his shade be blessed?"

"The Emperor died after drinking too much, your sister had to be sedated after seeing his body, and your father's guarding her and the new Emperor Beyazit." Fereshtah was evidently not someone who believed in honey-coating bad news.

The man's shoulders slumped, his eyes full of anxiety. "My sister is safe?"

"Apart from screaming like a stuck pig, she's fine," said the other Qom boy.

His brother shook himself like a dog coming out of the water. "Disturbing. But they've given her poppy syrup to sedate her."

The young man glanced sharply at Fereshtah. "What to do now? Am I needed here, Aunt?"

"No. Not now. Go back to your Army lodgings, lad. Your father has it all in hand." Fereshtah pointed imperiously.

The young man saluted. "Very well, Aunt Fereshtah." He and his companion loped off. Ihy found it interesting that he also treated Fereshtah like a superior officer.

"Was that a sibling of our Radiant Consort?"

"Yes, young Darius," said Fereshtah. "He's in town with his regiment—he wanted to be here for young Beyazit's birthday."

"He's a good man," said one of the Qom boys, approvingly.

"He'll be happy that he can see May again, now she's a widow," said the other boy. "He was so sad when they sent her away?"

They walked silently through the palace and the City, accompanied by guards. In the palace, all was in uproar: in the city, it seemed as if everything and everyone was poised, quietly waiting.

They reached an opulent townhouse, but before Fereshtah could knock, another tall dark-haired boy opened the door. Relief filled his face. "Umma!"

"Hullo Eren!" Fereshtah gestured at Ihy. "This is the Grand Vizier and his scribe. They are here to talk to your Baba. Artabanus is dead."

Eren did not react to the news of the Emperor's death. "Greetings, Eren of Qom, at your service. Do tell me if I can assist? "

Ihy blinked. "Another son, Fereshtah Hatun?"

Eren grinned. "There are, in fact, five of us."

Ihy looked around. "Should I expect more to emerge?"

"No, Sarozi and Havani are back in Qom," said one of the boys behind him. "Havani's leg is still sore. Sarozi is looking after him."

"What happened to his leg?" said Ihy.

The boy in front of him frowned. "War injury." Then he turned and shrugged. "Come in, Grand Vizier."

Fereshtah charged ahead. "Follow me. I'm sure you'll want to speak to Parvaz. I am guessing the silly fool is still asleep."

"Haha, Baba is in *trouble*," said one of the boys, loping behind them.

"Shoo, boys, shoo!" Fereshtah waved her hands at them.

"Yes, Umma," the three sons chorused, then shuffled off in a pack. Ihy was surprised they did not have wagging tails.

Fereshtah led Ihy to a sumptuous bedroom, where a large dark haired man lay asleep in a double bed draped with gold silk with a pattern of lilies: the design of Qom. It did not escape Ihy's notice that the particular lily they'd chosen for their symbol was beautiful, but the pollen caused irritation to the eyes, and the stamens could be distilled into a poison.

A slave with a bowl sat beside the bed on a chair. "He has not vomited again, Mistress."

Fereshtah sighed. "Finally, it must be passing. Probably just as well, we don't want him vomiting on our Grand Vizier here." She shook the man roughly. "Parvaz, dear. Wake up! The Grand Vizier is here!"

The man groaned and rolled over, showing his hairy chest, slightly greying. "My head hurts, Fereshtah."

"Rightly so." His wife folded her arms. "But it could be worse? At least you're not dead."

Parvaz sat up suddenly, his green-hazel eyes wide, and then groaned. "Who's dead?"

"Artabanus," said Fereshtah.

"O gods—" Parvaz went pale. "Give me the bowl, I had." Then he retched and retched, but nothing came out.

Fereshtah brought over a chair. "Sit, Grand Vizier."

Ihy was feeling rather unwell; Parvaz's retching sounds were infectious. Eventually Parvaz stopped and raised his face. "Ye gods! What's happened to Artabanus?"

"He was found dead in his bed." Ihy watched carefully for any signs of dismay.

Parvaz did not seem surprised; only grimly resigned. He passed his hand over his face. "Ah. Did his heart stop, then? He needed to lose weight, but there was no telling him that—"

Ihy narrowed his eyes: it did not escape his notice that both Fereshtah and Parvaz had attempted to paint the death similarly.

"Amaya was hysterical," said Fereshtah, disapprovingly, now standing beside Parvaz, her hand on her husband's bare shoulder. "We had to sedate her. I slapped her and it didn't work."

"But my great-nephew Beyazit—he is unharmed?" Concern knit Parvaz's brow.

"Entirely," said Fereshtah drily. "Vashir has the apartments guarded. He is suspicious."

Parvaz's eyes widened. "Surely my brother-in-law does not suspect *me*?"

Fereshtah laughed heartily. "Who would suspect you of anything, my dear? You are as honest as the sky is blue. No, he does not suspect you."

"I might," Ihy noted.

Parvaz's eyebrows went up, and his face became shuttered. "I see."

Fereshtah moved closer to her husband, her expression suddenly fierce. "They have been friends for many moons, Grand Vizier! Boon companions! He ate everything Artabanus ate! Drank everything he drank! Smoked everything he smoked!"

"More's the pity," moaned Parvaz, theatrically, clutching his head.

"Who else was at this dinner?" Ihy regarded the man narrowly.

"Oryxates and Youtar." Parvaz's eyes widened. "If the Emperor was poisoned—by the gods, do you think they are dead too? I *feel* like I have been poisoned, to be honest. This is horrendous. I hope they live—"

"I have not heard anything from Daria or Xenia," said Fereshtah. "No doubt those boys are unwell, because it sounds like you were all most unwise with the substances you ate and drank, but I think they live still."

"Can you tell me where these men reside?" said Ihy.

Fereshtah strode out. Then she came back with a piece of papyrus. "Here are their addresses in town."

"You know them well?" Ihy inspected the addresses: they were not far away.

"They are my honoured brothers." Parvaz drew in a breath. "We were all in the Army together. Me, Oryxates, Youtar and Artabanus. We were officers together. I've known them all since before I was wed."

"How's Xenia recovering after the latest daughter?" said Fereshtah.

"Well enough, I gather—" said Parvaz.

"Why did you organise the dinner last night with the Emperor?" Ihy interjected. He was not going to let them derail the conversation.

Parvaz spread his hands. "Why? Because Artabanus asked me to." He frowned. "He's always desperate to reminisce about times past." Then he grimaced. "Well, he was."

"He was rather pathetic, really," said Fereshtah.

"*Fereshtah!*" said Parvaz, staring at his wife with apparent horror.

"Well, he was, and I won't mince my words." Fereshtah scowled. "I'm not sorry he died. He never liked me and I never liked him, as you'll find out readily enough, Grand Vizier. He called me 'Horse-face' and would pretend to forget my name. I don't think he liked any of us—" She snapped her mouth shut.

"Whom else did he dislike?" Ihy sensed something in the woman's sudden silence.

Parvaz looked at his wife, and put a restraining hand on her arm. "Her father is Houmayoun of Ishtakr. Artabanus did not value his advice. This too, is well known. I may as well tell you openly, before you misconstrue our position. I have found that it pays to be honest."

"Ahhh," said Ihy. "Is Houmayoun Khan, perchance, in the city too?"

The couple looked at him. "No? He's an old man now, and frail. He's retired to his estate, long ago." Fereshtah's long face shadowed. "He mourns my brothers still, killed during the reign of Sargon XXII."

"The Kingmaker," breathed Ihy. "That's what they named your father."

"So they did." Fereshtah put up her long chin bravely, but she was trembling slightly. "So you see, we have every reason to be loyal to the current regime."

"Those who make Kings can break them," Ihy reminded her.

"Baba's well past achieving that," Fereshtah said, sneeringly, but Ihy thought he detected fear in her voice.

"I will be back," said Ihy.

"No doubt you will," said Parvaz, genially. "Hopefully I'll be in finer fettle when you next visit. My head still feels like two hundred horses are stamping on my forehead."

Fereshtah showed Ihy out, shadowed by the three hulking sons.

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The interviews with Oryxates and Youtar were not very useful, Ihy reflected. Both men were genuinely horrified and shocked when they were woken from their hungover misery and discovered the Emperor was dead. Ihy could not help comparing their shock and horror with the grim resolution and distinct lack of surprise from the denizens of the House of Qom.

"Oryxates did say to him that he shouldn't mix poppy and spirits," Youtar noted, sadly. "But did he ever listen to anyone else? No, he wasn't."

There was only one interesting tidbit in the interviews: it came from Oryxates' wife Daria.

"So you get ... got ... along well with our Celestial Emperor?" said Ihy.

"O yes, as well as anyone," said Oryxates. "I mean, he was an anxious fellow, in a strange way. He was never *that* well liked by his older brothers, and I do think that it ... kind of rubbed off on him? Gave him a chip on his shoulder. Made him very capricious."

"I'm aware of that," said Ihy.

"Didn't Parvaz have a tiff with him recently?" said Daria.

Oryxates turned to his wife. "I wouldn't call it a tiff exactly—"

Ihy pounced on this. "Of what do you speak? Tell me."

Oryxates shrugged. "Sarozi and Havani were captured by the Gondorim, just before Qom Hadara, and the commander Artabanus had appointed did nothing. Parvaz sent Artabanus a note asking for help, and Artabanus ignored it."

"Havani is the one with a broken leg, still in Qom?" said Ihy.

Oryxates' eyebrows went up. "Yes! Havani fell off his horse when they caught him. To be fair to the Westrons, they actually did a capital job in making his leg better—"

"Fereshtah says the interrogator used the broken leg against them, though," said Daria.

Ihy breathed in. "The *interrogator*?"

"O, that's right, the boys were interrogated by some fellow who spoke like the poet Ablas, Parvaz said last night," Oryxates noted.

"Parvaz raised this with you last night? But not with the Emperor?" Ihy wondered if he was smelling blood.

"No, he raised it with all of us, of course. No secret between combat brothers! He was wondering why they didn't use Nilofar's son to interrogate instead: we concluded it was because the boy's Haradric was shit and Nilofar is mad—"

"Who's Nilofar?" Ihy had not heard of anyone of that name.

"Houmayoun Khan's eldest daughter," said Oryxates. "Married a Gondorim Sea Lord over twenty years ago now. Never came back."

"And I daresay they're all quite pleased about it, because Fereshtah says Nilofar's *quite* insane, although very useful when it comes to inventing transportable ink blocks—" said Daria.

"May the Westrons enjoy her company," laughed Oryxates.

"To whom is this woman married?" said Ihy. "Is he fighting in the current war?"

"O, no, Fereshtah says he's not really a fighting kind of fellow," said Daria. "Can't remember his name—something related to the place whence he comes?"

"Amrothos! Of Dol Amroth!" exclaimed Oryxates. Then he winced, and touched his temples. "I was too loud for myself. That hurt my head."

"I have never heard of Amrothos of Dol Amroth," said Ihy, suspiciously.

"Just so—" said Daria "—They keep him out of their politics, on account of the insanity."

"His wife's insanity?" Ihy was confused.

"No, *Amrothos Khan's* insanity. He's apparently even worse than her, Fereshtah says. Houmayoun Khan was extremely entertained when the Prince of Dol Amroth wrote to complain that he'd

unwittingly been saddled with *two* lunatics after the couple wed—! Although they do send very nice presents to their relatives. And Parvaz said that boy of theirs was polite and sane enough, when he handed over his cousins—”

Ihy was confused and suspicious. “Wait—a child of Nilofar’s handed over Parvaz’s boys to him?” He wondered if the son had communicated with his cousins about the Emperor, and if any plots had been born in that moment.

“Yes, one of Nilofar’s sons was there when they handed over the boys, Parvaz said—but the Scourge of Harad did the formalities,” Oryxates confirmed. “We were discussing it yesterday—we wondered whether Nilofar taught the Scourge of Harad his Haradric? Because he has an Ishtakr accent—?”

“O you should have asked me! Fereshtah didn’t think she’d have the patience to teach anyone anything,” said Daria. “Apparently Nilofar’s boys got sick of her speaking to them in Haradric and refused to use it, that’s what Fereshtah said, and they’re not very fluent once you get past the usual pleasantries—”

“So, to get back to the point,” Ihy drew a deep breath to calm himself. “Parvaz was angry with Artabanus after his sons were captured, and he didn’t help?”

“He was *somewhat* peeved,” Oryxates confirmed. “However, he paid the ransom, and the Gondorim delivered the boys up as agreed, so no harm done. He’s not the kind to hold a grudge.”

“No, never held a grudge in his life,” confirmed Daria. “Also, Fereshtah told me that the Imperial commander of Qom Hadara had his head lopped off by the Scourge of Harad. She considered it a just outcome, in light of his failure to help her boys.”

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When Ihy got back to the Palace, he looked up the lineage scrolls in the library. Fereshtah was indeed Houmayoun’s daughter, from his second wife, as was Amaya’s mother Nazanin. Nilofar was a daughter from his first wife. The lineage scrolls noted that Nilofar of Ishtakr had married Amrothos of Dol Amroth, and that they had three sons: Imrazor, Minhotar and Adrahil. The background of Amrothos of Dol Amroth was not in the scrolls. Ihy noted the determinedly Númenórean nature of the names, and wondered if Nilofar Hatun had decided to jettison her heritage. From what Daria had said, she apparently continued to keep in touch with at least one of her sisters in Harad.

Ihy called in his spies. He wanted to know who, out of Houmayoun’s brood or relations by marriage, was in Beyazim, other than, of course, Amaya of Amrun and the new Emperor.

As it happened, he had seen all present in the city in the aftermath of the late Emperor’s death: Vashir of Amrun, his son Darius, Parvaz and Fereshtah of Qom, and three of their five sons. This pricked his suspicions: they were keeping close.

As interesting as those present were, the absences were interesting too. Houmayoun’s youngest surviving son, Ramin, diplomat extraordinaire, was not in town, nor were his family, although he often visited Beyazim this time of year. Houmayoun’s other surviving son Darev, married to Beyazit the First’s eldest granddaughter, was also absent; he’d pleaded a recurrence of the malarial infection which seemed to plague him at suspiciously convenient times. General Bahadur, married to Atossa, another of Houmayoun’s daughters, was not in town either: he had cited his need to keep fighting the war with Gondor as a reason not to attend Beyazit’s birthday. Word of Bahadur’s extreme

dissatisfaction at the Emperor's tactics in the war with Gondor had reached even Ihy's ears, and he wondered if this was something that Bahadur and Parvaz had shared.

"Of course," said one of the spies, "they were *all* in Ishtakr, just a month past."

Ihy sat up. "Who? Who was in Ishtakr?"

"Absolutely all of them, save the Radiant Mother of the Emperor, and the mad one in Gondor and her family," said the spy.

"*Why* were they there?" said Ihy.

"The patriarch turned seventy," confirmed the spy. "Said he wanted a quiet party in the countryside."

"There's no chance the mad one in Gondor could have been there, is there?" Ihy was playing with the idea of a pact between Houmayoun and the Westrons: everyone knew Houmayoun had been Ambassador to Gondor, and gotten along famously with the Westrons. He would not be surprised if Houmayoun had objected to the war on the basis that he had always preferred trade to war.

"O no, she *hates* Harad," said the spy. "Our intelligence indicates that she helped design those blasted trebuchets they can put together on the field?"

Ihy was shocked. "She would betray her own nation thus?"

"I told you, she's as batty as a cave full of night squeakers. They do wonder if it's because Sargon killed some of her brothers and all the rest had to hide in the desert. She might not have forgiven Harad?"

"But she does write to at least one of her sisters, still?"

"She writes to 'em all," said the spy. "Nothing of much use: women's business. So-and-so married so-and-so-else, and here is a lovely recipe for coconut fish, and I caught some squid and used their ink."

"Do we know what she thinks of our late Emperor?" said Ihy.

The spy laughed. "You haven't heard about the hamster?"

Ihy blinked. "The what?"

"The hamster. Apparently when he was a lad, our Emperor may he live—well, he won't now—stepped on one of Nilofar Hatun's blasted hamsters. And she ticked him off in front of his father and his brothers, and he was right annoyed."

Ihy shook his head. "She ... I'm sorry. I do not quite follow this? The mad daughter was acquainted with the Emperor, may his shade be blessed?"

"Aye, at one time Beyazit the First, may his shade be blessed, was thinking of marrying Artabanus off to her," the spy confirmed. "So they went up to Ishtakr but it was a disaster, because she was in the

way of breeding hamsters, and he got scared of them, and stepped on one. And that was the end of that, and they engaged her to a cousin instead, but he died, and she ended up in Gondor.”

Ihy put his hand to his forehead. “Well. It seems that they both had a lucky escape from that union? Do you think she’d bear enough of a grudge about it to organise for her family to assassinate him from afar?”

“No, I don’t think so,” said the spy doubtfully. “I mean she is mad, but not *that* mad?”

“I will raise it with Fereshtah Hatun, nonetheless,” Ihy decided.

* * * * *

The next day, the Radiant Consort—no, the Radiant Mother of the Emperor—had apparently recovered enough for Ihy to interview her. Of course, most vexingly, he was not allowed to speak to her without a eunuch retinue.

Amaya of Amrun sat at a table, fully veiled and gloved in purple silk, her maids kneeling beside her. She was totally still. Her startling pale grey eyes were downcast, and outlined in kohl.

Ihy sat down across from her. “Empress Mother. I am sorry for your loss.”

Amaya sighed. “Thank you, Grand Vizier. In times such as these—your sorrow is appreciated.” Her voice, when she was not hysterical, was measured, and deep for a woman’s.

“Would you mind taking off your veil?” Ihy asked.

“I would rather not,” said Amaya, with dignity.

“I should make it clear: this was not a request. It was a politely phrased command.”

Amaya looked over at the vast blue bulk of the Chief Eunuch, and the Chief Eunuch nodded at her. Ihy filed that interaction away for further information.

Slowly Amaya unhooked the sheer face veil, and then pushed off the gold-embroidered head scarf so it was only half on her head, and partly on her shoulders. Ihy had to resist an intake of breath; Kawab was less successful, and audibly gasped.

Now that she was not tear-sodden, Amaya of Amrun was one of the most beautiful women Ihy had ever seen. Other than in the harem the other day, the only other time Ihy had gained a fleeting glimpse of her had been through her veil, at her wedding to Artabanus—but since then maturity and age—and perhaps lines of sorrow—had only made her more beautiful.

She clasped her silken gloved hands in front of her. “So. With what can I help you?”

“I wish to inquire about what happened on the evening of our Celestial Emperor’s death, may his shade be blessed,” Ihy said.

Amaya took in a deep shuddering breath. She closed her eyes for a time and visibly collected herself. Then she said, “He called me to his chambers, as he often does when he is drunk.” She turned to look at Bijaan.

"I confirm this," said the eunuch in a rumbling tenor, and the maids chorused, "We, too, confirm this."

"When we got there, he was horribly ill—more than usual." Amaya gripped her hands together. "I asked a slave for a cool cloth, and then I wiped the vomit off his face. He said he was suffering from a pain in his stomach, and he clutched his belly and chest—"

"Yes—?" said Ihy.

Amaya looked down at her gloves again. "I am embarrassed. But I said—I said—I could distract him by coming to his bed."

"What did he say to that?" said Ihy.

"He said neither yea nor nay, but did not resist when I undressed him. Then—then—I undressed myself, while Bijaan sent out the servants." Amaya's face was scarlet.

"I confirm this to be true also," said the eunuch, behind her.

"So—he attempted to ... have congress with me. But he ... er, failed, before the necessary point ..."

Amaya stared fixedly at the knuckles of her gloves, and picked at the seams. "That is how it has been recently."

"The guards said it sounded like you were enjoying yourself—?"

Amaya looked up. Her eyes flashed with sudden rage. "What would you have me do, Grand Vizier? Tell him the truth? How would that end for me? And it would be unkind to him—" Her lower lip trembled. "I shall never have another child, now."

"Is that what you wanted?" Ihy asked.

Amaya's perfect brows went up and scorn covered her face: it suited her. "That is what we all want in the harem, Grand Vizier Ihy."

"I thought you all wanted to be mother of the next Emperor—" Ihy steepled his hands—"a goal you have achieved, Empress Mother."

Amaya drew in her breath with a hiss. "Withdraw that! I *demand* it, Grand Vizier."

"I do not withdraw it," Ihy insisted. "You know what I say is true."

Amaya stood. She was shaking: whether with rage or fear, Ihy was unsure. "This interview is over. Go!"

"How did you do it?" Ihy asked. "How did you administer the poison?"

Startlingly, Amaya smiled, in a sly, feline manner. "I administered no poison, Grand Vizier Ihy. You are *quite* mistaken." Her face hardened. "I shall not speak to you again, now that I know you intend to falsely accuse me thus."

She marched out, followed by her maids.

"You were disrespectful, Grand Vizier," rumbled the huge eunuch disapprovingly. "She will make you pay for that." Then he too left.

Ihy rubbed his hand over his balding scalp. "I guess I had better get a tester for my own food, now that I've annoyed her."

Kawab paused in his note taking. "She did *something*, Grand Vizier, I'm sure of it—although isn't she beautiful, like a silken painting?—but she was adamant that she didn't poison him?"

"My instinct is the same as yours," said Ihy. "I'm sure she was involved. But—how was the poison administered, if not for her? For I'm sure they must have used *something*? The stomach pain, the copious vomiting, the disorientation: it cannot simply be that he drank too much. Particularly not with half her family hanging around like flies on camel shit."

Kawab scratched his head. "You know that they have not found any poison in the wine or food left over after the meat grill? Or in the food in the Emperor's room? All the slaves have been fine."

Ihy signed. "Yes. I know. This is why I am mystified."

* * * *

The next day, after the formal Coronation Ceremony, Ihy was called before the new Emperor. He crawled to the throne and prostrated himself.

"Grand Vizier Ihy, I gather you have been irritating my mother," said the boy Emperor, in a piping voice. "I must ask that you desist, at this tragic time."

"I apologise from the bottom of my unworthy and worthless heart from upsetting your mother, O Glorious and Celestial Ruler of Harad, but I am obliged by my office to ask questions about your father's death, may his shade forever be blessed," Ihy mumbled to the carpet.

The boy tapped his fingers on the arm of the gold throne. "Umma has been upset enough. I do not want her screaming again. I command you to stop it."

"Verily I shall do as you command, O glorious Emperor," Ihy agreed, and then crawled out. Amaya had stymied him. As he left the throne room, he had seen the great blue bulk of Bijaan standing behind the throne, and the much smaller upright purple veiled figure beside him. He was left in no doubt about who controlled this new Emperor.

Then he went ascertain whether any Gondorim remained in the city. It transpired that there were currently only two of rank: the Ambassador and the Deputy Ambassador, with a skeleton staff. The spies told him that the Ambassador was a fool. The Deputy Ambassador had moved to Harad because it was acceptable to bed young men in Harad, and his father disapproved of his son's conduct. It was deemed that the diplomats were no risk to Harad, hence they had been allowed to stay. The Deputy Ambassador spoke with a Horondor accent, and had been taught by a refugee in Dol Amroth, associated in some way with Nilofar Hatun.

Ihy decided to call in the Deputy Ambassador. Nilofar Hatun had cropped up too often for his liking.

Deputy Ambassador Arahaelon was a stern tall man with grey eyes, dark hair and a pale face. He bowed in precisely the right way and then sat cross-legged in the Haradric fashion. Ihy called the servants to bring the *café*, to signal that the meeting was benign, despite the war between their nations.

“At the outset, I wish to convey my deep sorrow regarding the death of the Celestial Emperor of Harad.” Arahaelon’s voice was deep and resonant.

“‘Deep sorrow’?” Ihy was doubtful.

“I am sad when any man dies untimely,” said Arahaelon, tactfully. “No doubt you wish to ask whether I have any intelligence regarding his death?”

That had not been Ihy’s intention, but he seized the movement, given that it was being offered freely. “Naturally.”

“We think it was the Empress Mother,” hissed Arahaelon, in a low voice. “Members of her family from Amrun and Qom are here, did you realise? Bahadur was very unhappy with the Emperor’s tactics in the current war, while Parvaz was apparently furious after we captured his sons—and of course, Fereshtah was visiting the Empress Mother frequently just before the Emperor’s death, purportedly to discuss horses and birthday parties, but we have doubts—”

Ihy rolled his eyes and sighed. “Tell me something I don’t know, Lord Arahaelon?”

“I can’t tell you much more than that—” said Arahaelon sadly.

“I suppose it is reassuring that our suspicions are similar. In any case, I wanted to ask you about Nilofar Hatun—”

Ihy was startled when Arahaelon broke into laughter. “Why, by the Valar, would you wish to ask me about her?”

“Did she teach you Haradric?” Ihy asked. “You have an Ishtakr accent, with a Gondorim twang.”

“Nay, ‘twas Lady Nisenya, her lady-in-waiting, who taught me,” said Arahaelon. “The Prince Steward thought it best not inflict Nilofar and Amrothos on me, and after the Khandian pig incidents, I must say I saw reason in that.”

Ihy squinted. He was not sure what a “lady in waiting” was, but he did not want to expose his ignorance to the Westron. “Khandian pigs? You mean the larger rodents? Not hamsters?”

Arahaelon rolled his eyes. “You heard about the infestation of hamsters? After that, they started with breeding Khandian pigs. Damned nervous critters they were too, all shuddery and prone to squeaking. Not to mention the *real* pigs—they bred them for pork—apparently she called several of them Artabanus?—frankly I wanted none of it.”

“It seems from this that Nilofar Hatun bears a grudge against our late Celestial Emperor?”

Arahaelon smiled narrowly. “She certainly *disliked* the late Celestial Emperor immensely, may his shade be blessed. She will tell anyone who will listen that he is a mad dog who needs to be whacked over the head with a plank, and how pleased she is that King Elessar is administering a thorough

whacking. When I took this job, she said Harad was an annoying place, and that I would find it very boring and hot.” He paused, and looked thoughtful. “If she *actually* wanted to kill someone, however, she’d fire flaming naphtha at them from a trebuchet, or feed them to piranhas, or throw them into Orodruin— Anyway, there’d be no doubt it was *her*, because she’d want to be there to watch the outcome and note it down in her little book, and then conduct an autopsy—”

“What about her husband?” Ihy asked.

Arahaelon’s eyebrows shot up. “Amrothos? Again—flaming barrels of naphtha are more his style— just ask the pirates of Umbar. He does not have any opinion on the late Emperor that I’ve heard, and he has no grudge against Harad. He wouldn’t have married a Haradrim if he had. In fact, I have never met a less grudging person in my life. It’s hard to explain—but he doesn’t care about race or nationality or religion. All he cares about is logic. He says it’s sadly hard to come by—”

“He should help me investigate the Emperor’s death, may his shade be blessed, because I am finding logic is hard to come by as well.”

Arahaelon looked alarmed. “Don’t suggest it, even in jest! You will suddenly find them on your doorstep with assorted cats, hamsters and flamingoes. And then you will find the entire palace infested with hamsters, and the Imperial wing shall be accidentally blown up because they need to test a new formula for explosives—”

“So your government is not associated with our Emperor’s death?”

Arahaelon looked sardonic. “Us? No. We do not *do* assassination, not even back in Númenor, when Ar-Pharazôn usurped Tar-Míriel, and broke the Ban of the Valar. It is not honourable.” He spread his hands. “I acknowledge that in current circumstances, the death of Emperor Artabanus is advantageous to our realm. But I have a feeling that the interests of Gondor are not relevant at all, or only in a tangential sense, for I know that the North of Harad is sad to have lost trading opportunities with us—? Look to who benefits in your own realm.”

“I suspect you are right,” Ihy sighed.

“Also—look to your safety,” urged Arahaelon quietly. “I deem that the Scorpion of Amrun is on the warpath.”

Ihy blinked. “Who?”

Arahaelon smiled. “At last, I tell you something you didn’t know. That’s what they are calling Amaya of Amrun in the City. While neither you nor I can work out *how* she has done it, or what poison was used, the City is in no doubt that she is responsible.” He drained his cup of *café*, and stood and bowed. “Farewell, Grand Vizier. And consider your escape?”

* * * * *

Ihy knew he was in trouble when the Treasurer and the Minister for Trade turned up unexpectedly in his office.

“How is your investigation into our late Emperor’s death going, may his shade be blessed?” the Minister for Trade said, his brown eyes beady.

"Inconclusive," said Ihy. "I continue to investigate."

The Treasurer paced around Ihy's office. "Personally, I am absolutely sure that our poor dear Emperor's death, may his shade be blessed, was an unfortunate accident. The Minister for Trade and I were just agreeing on this very thing yesterday."

"I suppose our finances are in a parlous state thanks to this war?" Ihy asked.

"Terrible," confirmed the Treasurer. "But—but—if the war ceases, I may see a way out of it in the next twenty years—"

The Minister for Trade rubbed his hands. "I do hope the new Emperor, in his Celestial Wisdom, sees fit to offer parley with Gondor: we have very much suffered from the lack of trade with them." Then he pursed his lips. "Want a bit of advice from an old friend, Ihy? Don't stir things up unnecessarily. Really, it's not worth it. It was an entirely natural death. He did always drink a lot?"

Ihy could sense the flow of the tides. Everyone knew what had happened—if not quite how it had been achieved—but the advantages were such that they were choosing to ignore it, as long as the new regime was competent.

"Emperor Artabanus, may his shade be blessed, was a terribly *unpopular* Emperor," Kawab confirmed after the Treasurer and the Minister for Trade had left. "Not *quite* as insane as some of the Sargons—although it is hard to match Suleman the Impaler?—but not far off. Remember the famine—but that was before you were in office—?"

"I think the visits Vashir Emir made to the Treasurer and the Minister for Trade yesterday are relevant to the change of heart regarding our late Emperor and my investigation," Ihy replied drily. "They've been told to give me a message."

"Still—" persisted Kawab "—I do wonder if the blessings of Heaven had been withdrawn from our late Emperor? Maybe things will be better now?"

"Do you not think it is outrageous that the Emperor might have been murdered by a coalition of powerful families?" Ihy was angry.

Kawab scratched his head with his stylus. "Er, no, not really, sir? I mean, how else would they get rid of him?"

* * * * *

Ihy was nonetheless determined to finish his investigation properly. He did not delude himself that he was a great or powerful Grand Vizier, nor did he pretend to be a moral paragon—of course he took bribes when convenient!—but something about the situation had disturbed him. He wondered if he simply despised a job unfinished.

He was not allowed to question Amaya, so he tried her servants and associates. The giant eunuch Bijaan was an obdurate and stubborn wall of flesh. Ihy had no idea whether the man was telling the truth or not: he did not think the man cared about the truth, or about Emperor Artabanus, only his own power.

Despite repeated questioning, the Empress Mother's maids said that Amaya had been normal when she returned from the Emperor's rooms. They also asserted that Amaya was devoted to the Emperor. Ihy sensed that they were lying, but he could not shake them. The maids muttered darkly that the Blessings of Heaven had been withdrawn from Artabanus, and that this was why he had died in such an indecorous and unfortunate fashion. Kawab shot Ihy a triumphant look.

As Ihy walked away from the Empress Mother's chambers, he observed that eunuchs were arranging for former concubines of all grades to leave.

He stopped one man randomly. "I am the Grand Vizier. I would question you about the Emperor's death?"

The eunuch bowed, and gave an oily smile. "Very well, Grand Vizier Ihy?"

"Do you have any information about the death of the Emperor?"

"Only that when scorpions go mad and sting all in their path, we must move out of the way." The man stared at Ihy expectantly.

"Why do you look at me thus?"

"Have you worked out how she did it?" the eunuch whispered.

"No. None of the food or drink in the room was poisoned." Ihy sighed. "Nor was any of the food or drink at the banquet."

"Not strangled?" said the eunuch, avidly.

"No bruising on the neck or chest." Ihy realised he'd forgotten to check whether there was bruising on the arms, and swore. He was not used to murder investigations.

The eunuch ran off to a group of his fellows. Ihy was sure he was excitedly informing the other eunuchs of what he'd been told, but given that Amaya already knew he suspected her, it was nothing he minded being spread around the harem.

Ihy went down to the morgue to see if Artabanus's body had been kept.

"Sorry, Grand Vizier, Artabanus has been cremated," said the man. "Emperor's own orders, the gods bless the poor young lad. We've put him in a casket, for the funeral next week?" The man indicated an ornate (and grotesque) golden container covered in carbuncles.

* * * * *

"Well, Kawab, I think my days in this suite are numbered," said Ihy, when he came back to his chambers after Artabanus's funeral. The Emperor had announced at the end of the funeral who was on the Regent's Council. Ihy had taken a copy of the list from one of the notice boards.

Kawab looked over the list. "Whew! Mark my words—that's four sons-in-law of Houmayoun Khan, and one of his sons? Aye, you're right, it was them."

"The old man's the planner," said Ihy, glumly. "I can't prove it, but I'm sure they planned this at his birthday party—and that Vashir, Parvaz, Fereshtah, Darius and Amaya were all part of it, and possibly the mad Gondorim sister and her sons."

He'd been back to question Fereshtah about Nilofar, and Fereshtah had dissolved into hysterical laughter at the idea that Nilofar Hatun or her sons had been involved in the assassination of the Emperor.

"Certainly Nilofar disliked him, even more than I did, but she is currently interested in slime mould, not Emperors of Harad," Fereshtah told Ihy. "Moreover, if you're trying to pin this on the Empress Mother's family—I should say in fairness Amaya's mother Nazanin has no particular opinion of Artabanus, either positive or negative. If anything—she thought it was funny that the hamster was stepped on, because we did find them somewhat vexing."

Ihy was not sure what slime mould was. His research into the matter did not enlighten him. At the least, it did not seem to be capable of being used as a poison.

His spies informed him that Nazanin of Amrun was the least political woman in the whole world: her main interests in life were tending to her giant brood of children and her estate. Ihy supposed it left Vashir free to be the head of the Regent's Council, and one of the most grasping, prosperous men in Harad.

"Ramin Khan just came back to the City," Kawab noted. "As did Darev Khan and General Bahadur. What do you think that means?"

"It means the coup is almost complete, and the war will soon end." Ihy tried to stay still, while his valet plaited and oiled his beard for him. "Houmayoun's son-in-law Vashir the head of the Regent's Council, his granddaughter the Empress Mother, and his great-grandson the Emperor?"

"At least it wasn't bloody, like the coup displacing Sargon XXII, or the slaughter before Beyazit I came to the throne," said Kawab admiringly. "Only one person died: Artabanus. Really, it was very clean?"

"Typical of Houmayoun," muttered Ihy. "Fiendishly clever, but he doesn't like messes. Not ... not after his older sons were killed ..."

"If that Southern mob who've been threatening to overthrow Artabanus had had their way, it would have been much more bloody—"

"At the moment, my main concern is to keep my head on my neck," said Ihy. "If you want to leave my service—I will understand—?"

"No, I'll hang around to see what happens next," said Kawab, cheerfully, while Ihy tried not to wince at the metaphor.

"I never interviewed Darius of Amrun," said Ihy, and decided to talk to the lad for the sake of completeness, even though he knew now he would never get to the bottom of this.

It was unnerving to meet a masculine, bearded version of the Empress Mother, with a more hawkish profile. Unlike his sister, Darius Khan was a quietly spoken, polite man with a gentle manner.

"I honestly do not know or understand *what* happened," said Darius, spreading his hands, while his second in command, the handsome green eyed man Ihy had seen accompanying him before, stood behind him. "All I can say is this—at my grandfather's birthday party, Fereshtah suggested I come down to Beyazim, and help her show Beyazit how to ride. She thought it would be good for the lad. And then she wrote to me to confirm it." He rummaged around in the embossed leather bag slung over his shoulder, and drew out a letter.

Ihy scanned the letter. It was a normal affectionate letter from an aunt to a nephew, full of news about horses. It noted that Artabanus had not taught his son to ride, and accordingly, help from a male relative on his mother's side was needed now the boy was of age.

"I am quite good with horses," said Darius proudly, after Ihy handed the letter back. "I am a cavalry officer."

"That you are," said the green eyed man behind him, smiling warmly, and Ihy realised they were lovers.

"Have you had any communication with your sister?" Ihy asked.

Darius widened his eyes. "I write to her, once a month. And she writes back, but I sense her letters are not truthful." He looked suddenly heartbroken. "Is May—happy—? Is she well—? Do you think I could finally see her again?"

"She is well," said Ihy. "You will have to ask your father, I suppose."

Darius sighed. "Maybe I can ask Uncle Parvaz instead. I prefer not to ask Baba for favours."

"O, don't be silly, Dari," said the younger man. "I'll come with you."

"Very well. Baba did say—he *did* say when we got to Beyazim, didn't he, Batis?—that he was worried about someone assassinating both Artabanus and Beyazit—and I know there has been unrest in the South." Darius frowned. "That's one reason I thought I'd stay close to the palace. You are guarding Beyazit well, Grand Vizier?"

"Exceptionally well," said Ihy, drily. He wondered if Vashir's role had been to raise the idea of assassination in a melodramatic fashion, before anyone else did. He paused. "What do you know about your Aunt and cousins in Gondor?"

Darius snorted. "Nilofar? She's mad! But she sends us exceptional presents, or at least she did, until the war broke out." He paused and turned to the man behind him. "Did you know, Batis, Sarozi and Havani *met* one my Gondorim cousins briefly, but it was very awkward, on account of Minhotar being on the other side. They did not exchange more than a few embarrassed greetings."

"Are you sure they did not exchange more than greetings?" Ihy narrowed his eyes.

"Of course they didn't; they're at *war*. None of my cousins are traitors to their realms! It is dishonour to even suggest it!" Darius looked genuinely shocked and outraged.

"I see," said Ihy.

“Grand Vizier, on a practical level, I don’t think anyone would be fluent enough in each other’s respective languages to hatch any plots: my Westron is excellent, but the Qom boys can order a beer in Umbar and that’s about it? Meanwhile Aunt Nilofar has told Umma that the Dol Amroth cousins have *terrible* Haradric—she’s annoyed by it, and so is my Grand-baba. Uncle Parvaz said when we last saw him that Minhotar spoke like a baby who’d read and memorised an engineering text?” Darius giggled. “Apparently Minhotar accidentally used the wrong pronoun for the Scourge of Harad in the parley. Called him a ‘her’. If it hadn’t been such a serious situation, it would have been hilarious—”

“How embarrassing!” Batis grimaced.

“Why does everyone say your Aunt from Gondor is mad?” said Ihy. “She sounds extremely intelligent and cunning to me?”

“She’s apparently so clever that it’s a problem, so everyone’s relieved the Gondorim are lumbered with her: she’d have gotten into trouble here. She’s horrendously, insanely honest, and not at all tactful or political.” Darius spread his hands. “As an example, Grand Vizier—some years ago, she repeatedly called my father some kind of bulky sea creature from the North, and when he didn’t know what it was, she sent an *etching* to him to illustrate. She explained in great detail in the accompanying letter that the creature is very fat and smelly, and has teeth like Baba’s moustache—along with discussion of the migration of the creature and the fish it likes to eat—and *then* she said that she has named one of her cats after Baba too, because the cat is fat and lazy.”

Batis burst into hysterical laughter. “O, that is precious.”

“Baba was so furious,” said Darius, admiringly. “So anyway, I’m inclined to like Aunt Nilofar, even if I’ve never met her.”

“You don’t like your father?” Ihy seized on this.

“Who *does* like my father, other than my mother?” Darius asked rhetorically. “Maybe my brother Esfandiyar likes him too, just because of a natural sympathy? I really can’t think of anyone else—”

“He is rather a beast,” the younger man agreed. “A sea beast.”

The two men laughed again.

“Your father is head of the Regent’s Council?” Ihy tried to leverage the lad’s dislike of his father. “You do not feel upset that you have no role? Is there anything you want to tell me about your father? Or about the late Emperor?”

Darius shrugged. “Me? No, not at all. I am quite *out* of all of that. For whatever reason, my personality is closer to Umma’s than Baba’s.”

“I have to push Darius to promote himself,” scolded Batis.

“Before I go—you said you went to Ishtakr for your grandfather’s birthday?” said Ihy, in a last ditch attempt to ascertain something of use.

Ihy sensed a slight wariness. “Yes, so I did?”

“Was anyone from Gondor there?”

Darius and Batis looked at him like he was mad.

“No. We’re at war, as I just said? And while my cousins are my cousins, they are Gondorim and the enemy, and accordingly, not invited. It made Grand-baba a bit sad, because he wants to see them again before he dies, but there’s nothing for it, is there?”

* * * * *

As it turned out, Darius Khan was wrong. No sooner had the Regent’s Council been appointed than the Emperor, in his Celestial wisdom, announced that General Bahadur and Darev Khan were going to sue for peace with the Gondorim.

Ihy sat and fumed. He was sure that these things were linked: Houmayoun’s family and their dislike of Artabanus, General Bahadur’s dissatisfaction with the war, the capture of Parvaz Pasha’s sons and the sack of Qom Hadara, the desire of the Empress Mother and Vashir Emir for control and power, and the desire of the North for peace and trade with Gondor.

From the looks the Empress Mother gave him in the corridor, he did not think he would keep office much longer. Her malice was plain even with the cover of her veil. He waited to hear if he was to be hung, drawn and quartered. He knew well that Artabanus had chosen him precisely because he was not powerful or associated with any of the large dynasties, and thus he was expendable.

In the end it was Darev Khan who came to him, seeking a private audience.

“How’s the malaria which prevented you from attending the city earlier?” Something in Ihy pricked him to inquire maliciously.

“All well now,” Darev said, settling himself opposite Ihy.

“A miraculous recovery.”

“Indeed.” Darev smiled. “On that note, old chap, you’re not getting any younger.”

“Do—do—you want me to step down?” Ihy was not sure whether to expect something more vicious, but recalled Kawab’s comments about a ‘clean’ coup.

Darev’s face flooded with relief. “I am glad we understand each other, Grand Vizier Ihy. You see—I recently visited a lovely island in Middle Harad. There’s a beautiful estate on it. It struck me—that it’s the kind of place a man like you might be very happy. Wonderful library in that place.”

“How long has Houmayoun Khan been spending stocking the library up?” Ihy wondered.

Darev blinked. “What does *Baba* have to do with it?”

Ihy thought Darev was a bad liar.

“What if ...” Ihy had to know “... what if I don’t step down?”

Darev shrugged. "That's your choice, isn't it? Of course, I won't be spending any more time around this palace than I need to for my new duties. It's not always the most pleasant place, and sometimes it can be downright dangerous for people to stay here." Ihy was strangely relieved to hear the veiled threat.

Darev continued blithely, "Anyway, I'm glad Beyazit exists, otherwise I might be in an awfully sticky situation?"

Ihy stared at Darev. "What do you mean?"

"My wife Aergul is Beyazit's cousin, on the other side, as you might know," Darev explained. "Our son—he's only eight—he'd have been in line for the throne, and really I wouldn't wish that on anyone, but most particularly not my own son." He paused. "How is your investigation into the late Emperor's death going?"

"I am sure you know very well," Ihy informed him drily, realising that even if Beyazit had been killed in the coup, Houmayoun would have had a back-up grandchild on the throne. "The evidence suggests that the Emperor choked on his own vomit, after a session of heavy drinking. It is just that the Ishtakr, Amrun and Qom families have their fingers all over *everything*."

Darev smiled ruefully, charmingly. "There are rather a lot of us. And because we're related to Beyazit, we tend to be around the place upon special occasions, such as birthdays? It's entirely explicable, you have to acknowledge. Although I note—I was not there yet?"

"A likely excuse," grumped Ihy. Then he sighed heavily. "Very well. I shall retire to the country. Houmayoun can have his clean coup if he wants."

Darev clapped him on the shoulder. "Good chap! I'm very pleased to hear it. Farewell!"

"Can I ask you something?" Ihy said as Darev turned to go.

Darev's face was open. "Yes?"

"How did you do it?"

Darev smiled. "Do what, Grand Vizier? You yourself have noted that Emperor's death appears—upon all the evidence—to be an unfortunate accident? You did not find any evidence of poison or violence, did you? And I expect you shall write a report to that effect?"

"I may note that I suspect that persons unknown may have had a hand in what happened, but I am unable to work out who or how they achieved it," Ihy noted.

"Fair." Darev bowed. "And now, I leave you."