

It was a quiet rainy night at the Sword and Goblet when the Haradrim turned up, dripping wet, carrying a large pack.

"Hullo!" he said. "Are you having a free room in this public house?"

Tarie squinted at him: it took a moment to decipher what he had said because he had a very strong accent. "Let me just check with Master Longnir—"

She went out the back and said, "Longnir, there's this poor, wet swarthy man turned up here looking for a room to stay. Looks like a drowned rat."

Longnir patted his balding head, and said, "Give him Room Three."

Tarie went back out to the bar and said to the Haradrim, "Aye, Longnir says Room Three is free."

The Haradrim's white smile was startling in his dark face. "Thanking you!"

He was an extraordinary looking man, she thought, as she peered at him more closely: skin the colour of dark wood; short black hair and beard in little curls; regular features; dark and slightly angular eyes; and straight, even teeth.

"I'll just show you where it is," said Tarie, and led him up the rickety stairs to Room Three.

The Haradrim put down his large pack with a sigh. "The other places, they are saying there is no rooms being free."

"Really?" said Tarie, frowning at him. "It's not that busy, this time of year. I think that's a bit of a fib."

"What is 'bit of a fib'?" said the man.

"It means 'lie'," said Tarie. "I hope they're not turning you away because you're dark of skin and from Harad?"

"I am suspecting they is," said the man.

"That's not very nice. You can't help who your parents are, any more than I can." Tarie went to the cupboard and fetched a towel. "You look like you need to dry yourself down, so here you are. Make yourself comfortable, and come down and get a bite to eat after."

The man mouthed the words 'bite to eat'.

"I mean dinner," said Tarie, impatiently. "You know, eating?" She mimed eating with a knife and fork.

"Ah! I understanding!" said the man. "Thanking you beautiful lady!" He made an elaborate bow, with his hands placed together in a praying position.

"It's just my job," said Tarie, and went back downstairs.

When she got back down, the old drunkard Linnor was there. "I've been waiting nigh on an hour for someone to turn up," he grumbled.

"That's the most terrible lie, Linnor," said Tarie. "I just had to take a swarthy man upstairs—I was only away for a very short time—anyway, what can I get you?"

"The usual," said Linnor.

Tarie got him an ale from the keg. Then she blinked: the Haradrim emerged down the stairs. He had been wearing a dark cloak when he came in before, but he had evidently changed into dry clothing. He was wearing a startling orange dress with white trousers underneath, and matching orange shoes with curled toes. Tarie thought this was a little unusual, but then she felt relieved that at least he was wearing trousers under his dress.

"Argh!" said Linnor. "That swarthy savage's dress is giving me a headache!"

"He can understand you, Linnor, and actually it's quite nice to have a bit of brightness around the place," said Tarie. "People can be a little dull here in Minas Tirith."

The Haradrim smiled at her. "Yes! You can tell me answer! Why is people not wearing colour in this City?"

"I don't rightly know," said Tarie. "But it's ever been so. I mean, if you look at all those High Lords, they're ever so plain. I saw the Lord Steward once riding in the street, if you could believe it! You'd expect, with him being a Prince and all, that he might be wearing a golden crown and maybe some fancy red robes with fur? But no! He was just wearing black, and he looked like anyone else—"

"How'd you know he was the Lord Steward, then?" said Linnor.

"He was real tall, and on one of those Rohan stallions," said Tarie, and then giggled. "*Everyone* knew it was him. Awful handsome, he was, but kind of serious looking. Didn't look like he cracked a smile much?"

'Cracked a smile', mouthed the Haradrim.

"I mean, you know, opening your mouth and smiling like this?" Tarie demonstrated for the Haradrim.

"Ah," said the Haradrim. "My tongue of the Gondor is not being very good."

"Take a seat. What would you like to drink, Master?" said Tarie.

The Haradrim frowned and sat next to Linnor. "What is the drink people are having here?"

"Ale," said Linnor.

The Haradrim beamed at Linnor. "Then I will have ale! And one for my friend here!"

"Good man," said Linnor, and raised his mug.

"Also, our meals today are beef pie, vegetable soup and bread with cheese," said Tarie. "You might want the pie or the soup if you're a bit cold, Master Haradrim?"

"You can call me Nisroch," said the Haradrim. When he said his name, he rolled the 'r' and the 'ch' had a slightly guttural sound.

"Niss—rock," said Tarie doubtfully. "Right. And I'm Tarie and that's Linnor."

"I will have a pie," said the Haradrim. "And the ale."

Tarie went to the kitchen and asked them to heat up a pie, and then poured an ale for Nisroch. "There you go. That'll warm the cockles of your heart."

"What is being 'cockles of your heart'?" said Nisroch.

Tarie shrugged. "Actually I never thought about it before. It's just an expression. Do you know what it means, Linnor?"

"Nay," said Linnor.

Longnir, the lugubrious lantern-jawed publican, came out with a tray of cleaned glasses.

"Do *you* know where the expression 'warms the cockles of your heart' comes from, Master Longnir?" Tarie asked him. "The Haradrim wants to know."

"Nay, lass," said Longnir. "Just one of those things you say without really thinking about it?"

"Language is a funny thing, isn't it?" said Tarie. "You don't always think about why you say what you say."

The Haradrim stayed for a week, and regaled the common room with stories of crazy adventures on his way to Minas Tirith. Tarie reflected that he was better than a lot of other guests: he paid on time, never messed up his room too badly and was invariably polite and cheerful. She didn't really know why people were prejudiced against swarthy men, unless if it was from the War. Her Da hated Haradrim, but this particular swarthy man did not seem that savage.

When the Haradrim left, he pressed a little packet into her hand. "Mistress Tarie, I am remembering when I arrived, you being kind and getting me towel. This is present for beaaaauuuutiful lady."

Tarie laughed. "I'm not a beautiful lady, but I will never say no to a present! Thank you, and safe travels."

"I will be back." The Haradrim gave her his startling smile. "Next time, I having *café* beans to sell!"

The present was a string of exotic looking beads in a bright green colour with gold paint. Tarie had never seen anything so fancy in her whole life. She put them carefully in her glory box at home.

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In the Spring, the Haradrim was back, this time garbed in eye-watering turquoise dress and yellow trousers, with matching turquoise shoes. "Hullo, Master Niss-rock," said Tarie. "You want Room Three again?"

"Hullo beautiful Mistress Tarie, yes I wanting that room," said Nisroch.

"Did you get *café* beans?" said Tarie as she led him up the stairs.

"Yes," said Nisroch. "Do you want to try him?"

Tarie jumped: she was, at first, unsure exactly *what* he was asking her to try, but then wrinkled her nose as she realised he was talking about the beans. "I don't know what to do with *café*. I never saw it before. That's a rich person's thing."

She jumped again when the Haradrim clapped his hands loudly. "I, Nisroch, will SHOW YOU! Let me spoil you! Please be waiting downstairs!"

The common room was full of people. Shortly Nisroch came back, bearing a bag, and stood at the bottom of the stairs, spreading his arms out. "WHO IS WANTING TO SEE HARADRIC CAFÉ?" he boomed. "I WILL GIVING PEOPLE A SIP!"

A buzz went over the common room and everyone stared at him. "That's a rich person's drink, Master Haradrim," said Galasor, echoing Tarie.

"Ah, but if I getting more from Harad, we ALL can drink like rich men!" said Nisroch. "In Harad everyone drink it!" He brandished the bag, then got out of it a metal pot like a tall teapot, a strange machine with a handle and a small hessian bag, and placed it all on the table.

"Now, I taking the beans! You see him here? He is good beans!" Nisroch took the beans from the hessian bag, cupped them in his hand, and sniffed them. "Mmmm, see he smells so good! Smell him!"

Several people came up and gingerly sniffed at the beans, Tarie among them. "That is actually a lovely smell," she said.

"I telling you," said Nisroch, with satisfaction. Then he took out the machine with the handle and poured the beans into the top. "Now we grind him. Watch me grind him!"

Everyone watched with fascination as he turned the beans into powder, and emptied them into the tall pot.

"Now I needing some water and to boil him," said Nisroch.

Tarie sighed. "I'll get you some water. But you'll have to come out to the kitchen to boil it."

"What is going on?" said Longnir, coming out.

"Master Nisroch is going to show us all *café*," said Tarie.

"As owner of this excellent abode, you is getting FIRST DRINK, Master Longnir," said Nisroch. "It is Haradric honour!"

"Very well," said Longnir, raising an eyebrow. Tarie wondered if anyone had ever described the Sword and Goblet as an 'excellent abode' before. She suspected not.

"Come out to the kitchen," said Tarie, and Nisroch followed her out.

“He needs water and to put his strange little pot on the stove,” said Tarie to Cook, a grizzled ex-Army man who shaved his head so that he was totally bald. He doubled up as a bouncer if anyone gave any trouble, and was exceptionally good at breaking up knife fights.

“What’s he doing with that pot?” growled Cook, cracking his knuckles, while the kitchen hands gaped at Nisroch.

“He’s making *café*, Cook,” said Tarie. “I reckon he’ll give you some to try, if you ask him nicely?”

“Of course I will!” said Nisroch. “Thanking you for using the fires!” He filled the pot with several ladles of water from the water barrel and placed it on the stove. Suddenly the silver lid began to jiggle.

“Ah! He is ready! You having gloves or tongs?” said Nisroch to Cook.

Cook took the pot off the stove using a glove. “It smells good,” he said, sounding astonished. “It’s good quality?”

Nisroch gingerly opened the lid. “Of course it is the good quality! See how the edge has the creamy bit: light yellow froth! And the middle is dark, dark, dark, just like me!”

“Hmm,” said Cook, looking narrowly at Nisroch. “I suppose it is?”

“I will bring a little back here for you,” said Nisroch. “Also—do you need spices? I have spices? I bringing for you!”

Cook stared at Tarie and shrugged. Tarie shrugged back and made a surprised face, then followed Nisroch out as he took the pot back out to the bar, carefully.

“Who is wanting to try? Other than Master Longnir, who is first—?”

Everyone stared at him with round eyes.

“I’ll try,” said Tarie, putting her hand up.

Nisroch beamed at her. “And the beaaaaaaautiful lady Tarie will get second cup!”

“O, very well then,” said Master Padror. “You twisted my arm. I’ll try it too, you strange swarthy man with the silver tongue.”

“But my tongue is like yours, even if I am brown man!” said Nisroch, sticking out his tongue to demonstrate, and everyone laughed. His tongue was indeed pink, just like Tarie’s own.

Longnir sighed. “What kind of mugs do you need?”

“Little glasses if you are having,” said Nisroch, holding his thumb and forefinger a very small distance apart. To Tarie’s fascination, the palms of his hands were much paler than the rest of him.

“Well I don’t know as I have ones *that* little, but I suppose these will do—” Longnir got out the shot glasses.

“Perfect,” said Nisroch, and then everyone watched as he poured out the *café*, and handed the first glass to Longnir. “Smell him. Enjoy him. Then take small sip. Maybe it take time to get used to?”

Longnir took a sip and blinked. “Hot! Bitter! But ... sort of creamy?”

“YES! That is how you are telling is *best* beans. Creaminess!” Nisroch handed the second cup to Tarie. “Now the brave beautiful lady is trying!”

Tarie looked at it doubtfully, sniffed it and then took a sip. “Actually, I like it.” She took another sip. “Mmm! It’s good!”

Nisroch clapped. “You can be Haradrim, Mistress Tarie, except you is too milky pale! You have to be dark like the *café* bean to be Haradric! You will burn like tomato in our hot, hot sun.”

Many of the patrons in the common room tried the *café*.

“I giving you *prrrrrrincely* sample, my friends,” said Nisroch. “Not even the King is having this good! If you like the *café*, or if you is knowing other people who like him, come and see Nisroch, here at the Sword and Goblet! I will give you good and fair deal! I will grinding beans up for you! Also! I having the spices! You need cinnamon, cardamom, sesame, the *vanillé*? You ask NISSSSROCH! And next time I back, I bring the little pots, and some grinders of beans—? And maybe some silk?”

The next day, Tarie found Nisroch in the kitchen, in deep conversation with Cook, putting little paper packages on the bench. “I giving you samples of *this* spice, and *this* spice, and *this* spice—”

Cook looked slightly overwhelmed. “What do I do with them all?”

Nisroch beamed. “Make *kari*!”

“What is *kari*?” said Tarie.

“Haradric stew!” Nisroch turned around and beamed at her too. “Can I make for you, Mistress Tarie?” He turned back to Cook. “I show you how to make, Cook?”

“Hmm,” said Cook, glaring. “I don’t think so! This is *my* kitchen!”

“I promise it is tasty!” said Nisroch. “I making big promise! If it not tasty, you can throw me out of kitchen and beat me with big stick!”

“Don’t look at me with your big, sad brown eyes!” said Cook.

“It is only big sad brown eyes I have,” said Nisroch.

“I was referring to Tarie’s big, sad brown eyes, not yours. She’s looking at me like she might cry if I refuse you,” said Cook grumpily.

Nisroch glanced at Tarie, then back at Cook. “Let me do it! For Tarie!”

“Very well,” said Cook. “I don’t know how I get myself into these situations—!”

“Because you are good and nice man, even if you pretend to be fierce,” said Nisroch.

“Hmph,” said Cook.

The next morning, when she arrived at work, Tarie heard a lot of clattering and banging in the kitchen, as well as some strange foreign singing in a bass voice. She cleaned down all the tables, and then went to look. Nisroch was in the kitchen, grinding things up in a mortar and pestle with dangerous enthusiasm, smiling like a maniac, while Cook and the two kitchen hands watched, arms crossed and faces expressionless.

“So you adding this yellow turmeric here, and this *kari* powder, and now we grind up the cumin, cut up the dried chilli fruit, and a bit of cinnamon stick, and do you have the good Dol Amroth salt?—”

“It smells like *you*,” said Tarie. “The spices smell like you, Master Nisroch!”

“My Umma say you are what you eat,” said Nisroch. Then he squinted and banged the spices some more with the pestle. “Is that right saying? ‘You is what you eating?’ ‘You are what food you having?’”

Cook laughed. “Stick with the first option, and please don’t break my mortar and pestle.”

“Tarie must wait here while I put spice in the pan,” said Nisroch. “That is my faaaavourrrrrite part—”

They watched as he heated up oil in the pan, then he tipped the spices in. After a short interval, the air was filled with a rich smell, and Tarie’s jaw dropped open.

“That is the most amazing smell I have ever known!”

Nisroch smiled at her. “This is why I am wanting you to wait. It is my best part, as I say, when the spice release his smells.”

“Sounds rude,” said one of the kitchen hands, sniggering.

Nisroch laughed and blew a raspberry. “No, not being that kind of release of smells!”

Tarie laughed too. “I will leave you rude gentlemen to it.” She went back behind the bar, where Linnor was already waiting.

“What is that *smell*?” said Linnor.

“Master Nisroch is cooking me a Haradric stew,” said Tarie. “Interesting, isn’t it?”

“A bit odd,” said Linnor, twitching his nose and rubbing it. “I don’t know that I like it?”

“I’m fascinated,” said Tarie. “Anyway, I’ll get your ale.”

The Haradric stew took hours to make. Master Nisroch bustled in and out of the kitchen, checking it at intervals.

“By the Valar, man, anyone would think this bloody stew was your newborn baby,” said Cook.

“No one is eating baby and thinking it is delicious,” said Nisroch.

Eventually, some time before dinner, Nisroch pronounced himself satisfied. “I think he is finished, my special *kari* with chicken for Tarie.”

“Do I get some too?” said Cook.

“Yes, my friend! And the kitchen hands is getting too! And my friend Master Longnir! And my friend Master Linnor! And any other friend who is wanting!”

“I am not wanting,” muttered Linnor, but Tarie noticed he still took a spoon.

They gingerly took the spoons Tarie had laid out, and tried yellow stew in the pot. Tarie ate the spoonful and fanned her face: she felt a little as if her tongue was burning, but she did not want to hurt Nisroch’s feelings. “Ah! Delicious, really delicious ...” she coughed. She was sure her face was going red. Certainly, when she looked down at her chest, she looked rather flushed.

“SPICY!” said Linnor. “BRING ME ALE! I AM GOING TO DIE!”

“Argh!” said Padror. “Burning, burning, like the flames of Mordor!”

“Let me pour us all some, on the house,” said Longnir. He quickly drew some mugs, and they all took large draughts of ale.

Cook laughed at Nisroch’s woebegone face. “So it seems I’m not going to lose my job to a Haradrim. I *really* like it—you’re a very skilful cook, Master Nisroch—but I’m more used to spice than this lot, because I campaigned in Rhun and Khand when I was in the Army.” He rubbed his bald head. “I think can adjust it to Minas Tirith tastes! Would you mind if I meddled with your stew?”

“If you want,” said Nisroch, looking heartbroken; Tarie’s chest hurt for him.

“I want your recipe: it’s very good,” said Cook. “I just want to make some ... amendments ...”

Tarie sidled up to Nisroch and patted his shoulder. “I could taste all those smells, if that makes sense. Thank you so much for all that effort.”

Nisroch still looked very hurt, so she kissed him gently on the cheek, just like she might kiss her Ma, and he blinked at her, looking at her as if she’d just stripped her dress off.

“Oooh!” said Padror. “Who’s a lucky man tonight?”

Tarie rolled her eyes at Padror and tapped him on the arm with her spoon. “Go away, Padror! It’s not like that.”

She retreated behind the bar, and wondered if she’d made some horrendous cultural mistake. Master Nisroch was staring at her like a pole-axed steer.

It was true that Cook had a much better idea of what people in Minas Tirith liked. He amended the stew, changed the writing on the chalk board and said to Tarie, “Tell people Haradric Stew cooked by a real Haradrim is on the menu—”

“They will all be choking and dying in flames of Mordor,” said Nisroch glumly.

“Trust me,” said Cook, and winked at him.

Cook turned out to be right. People loved the amended Haradric stew. Secretly, Tarie herself preferred it: it was far less overpowering, but still had the really unusual favours. She would be happy to have it again.

“It was not proper Haradric flavour. He is watered down and sad,” said Nisroch in a low voice to Tarie, when she came to pick up the empty ‘Haradric’ stew bowl from his table.

“People here will just have to build up to your level of spices, Master Nisroch,” said Tarie. “But if you start to get people here liking a *little* bit of spice, you can sell more spices and then get them used to having more!”

“You are not just beautiful, but wise!” said Nisroch, perking up again, as if he were a puppet jerked up by strings. “I am thanking you!”

“No problems,” said Tarie. “I just don’t like to see anyone watered-down and sad.”

“You are funny lady,” said Nisroch.

Several days later, when Nisroch left again, he kissed Tarie’s hand. “I have another present for you.”

“Really, you shouldn’t,” said Tarie, blushing. “That last present was very fine, more than the likes of me deserve.”

The Haradrim glared at her. “You deserve nice things, Mistress Tarie, because you are nice person. I know from your face that my *kari* is too spicy for your taste, but you pretend he is not, and say nice things about him.” Then he pressed a small package into her hand and strode off before she could hand it back or deny that she’d pretended to like the stew.

After her shift was finished, she opened the package, and gasped. Inside were a set of thin gold bracelets. Tarie suddenly wondered if the Haradrim was attempting to seduce her. She was startled to realise that she was not necessarily averse to the idea. Among other things, she wanted to know if he was that colour all over ...

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The next time the Haradrim was back, it was late Spring, going into Summer. He had brought along an entire cart. Once he was settled in his customary room, he came back down.

“This weather is being more better, Mistress Tarie,” he said. “Can you be helping me?”

“What do you need, Master Nisroch?” said Tarie, leaning over the bar.

“Where is this place being?” said Nisroch, and handed her a sheet of paper.

The letters all danced and jiggled in panic in front of her eyes. Tarie did not want to admit the embarrassing truth. “I couldn’t really say, Master Nisroch,” she prevaricated.

Nisroch looked at her thoughtfully. "You cannot read?"

"Of course I can read!" lied Tarie, and pushed the paper back to him with irritation. "What do you think I am!"

Old Linnor bestirred himself and came over. "O, that's the address of the fabric merchants on the Fourth Circle. They've got a big green sign outside. What are you selling to them this time, Master Nisroch?"

"Fabric dye!" Nisroch rifled in the pocket of his bright yellow dress. "Here! Look! It is cheap saffron! You can make yellow as bright as my *djellaba*!"

Tarie inspected the threads he brought out of the paper packet. "I never saw it before. Looks like little orange worms, doesn't it? And that comes out yellow?"

"Yes! And I having madder and other colours—" beamed Nisroch. "I also bringing pots for the *café* and more beans, and more spices, if you are needing any for Haradric stews, and I having—" He paused, and his big eyes went wide. "—Wait here! Do not go anywhere! Do not be moving!"

Tarie looked at Linnor. "Well it wasn't like we were going anywhere, was it?"

Linnor laughed. "Nay. He's a funny fellow."

Nisroch came rushing back down, bearing a bright swatch of pink material in his hands, and shoved it into Tarie's hands. "Mistress Tarie! Consider the gift! Haradric silk!"

"Oooh, really I couldn't," said Tarie. "I never touched silk before."

"Touch it!" said Nisroch. "It is very soft. Very fine."

Tarie stroked it. It was the softest material she had ever felt. It made the hairs on her arm stand up. She handed it back. "Isn't it nice? There you go, Master Nisroch. Thank you for letting me touch it."

Nisroch thrust it back at her. "No! Consider the gift! I wanting you to wear." Then he picked it up and wound it around his neck, and blinked his big dark eyes at her. "You wearing like this!" He wound it around his face. "Or like this!" He pouted his lips and tied it around his forehead. "Or like that!"

Tarie could not stop laughing. "Gorgeous."

Nisroch put it deftly around her neck without touching her, and arranged it fussily. "There. It look good on me, of course; but it look even more lovely on a beautiful lady." Then he said, "Now I going to fabric merchants and introduce me, FAMOUS NISROCH!"

"Are you really famous?" said Linnor.

"I am not really being famous, but I will be," said Nisroch, then he strode out.

"He *likes* you, our Tarie," said Linnor once Nisroch had left. "Also it's no shame not to be able to read, if you never got taught. I'm guessing—your Da being as he is—you never learned?"

Tarie blushed to match the scarf. "I don't know why you would say such a thing, Linnor! And don't talk to me about Da! He's the Pits o' Doom."

"I might be a drunkard but at least I don't hit my children," said Linnor.

"You don't *have* any children!" said Tarie. "'Least, not as far as I know?"

"Mmm," agreed Linnor. "That's why I don't hit them."

Cook came out from the kitchen. "Did I hear the dulcet booms of our favourite crazed Haradrim earlier, Tarie? Tell him I've found a great place for him to buy Dol Amroth sea salt in bulk—"

"He's just gone out to some fabric place," said Tarie. "He's into things to dye cloth or something, but I reckon he'll still be interested in salt? Anyway, I'll tell him."

The next day, Nisroch came to her with another piece of paper, holding a pen. "Can you tell me what this is saying?"

Tarie stared at it. There wasn't much writing on it. "I don't rightly know. I don't know where that place is."

Nisroch showed his gleaming white teeth in a smile. "It is not a place. It is your name. I wrote it on a paper just for you." He traced over the letters with his finger. "T-A-R-I-E. If it is being quiet in here, you can practice writing it."

"That's my name?" said Tarie. "You can write it even though you speak some foreign tongue?"

"Yes." Nisroch bent over and did a little scrawl underneath. "That is how I would write it in my language, but it comes out more as 'Taa—aa-rrrrrrreee'."

"Looks like scribbles to me," said Tarie, doubtfully, tracing it with a finger, distinctly aware of how close Nisroch was to her. He smelled interesting, like a mixture of spices and floral perfume.

Nisroch laughed. "Yes! You are right! All Haradrim and Khandian and Umbarian language is all being scribbles!" He brought out a document. "See! Look at it. Just scribble, scribble, scribbling."

"I can actually see that it's different to how we write," said Tarie.

"See, that is start to reading," said Nisroch.

Tarie remembered something. "Cook has a good source of bulk salt from Dol Amroth for you—go see him. Also, our 'Genuine Haradric' stew is really popular—we now have it once a week, I'll have you know! Longnir is very happy with you. I'm sure we'll need to buy some more spices off you—?"

"I give Cook new *kari* recipe this time, and he can RUIN it for barbarian Westron tastes," said Nisroch, dramatically. "It is the goat *kari*, but I not never see goats eaten here? Where can I get the goat meat?"

"I couldn't really say. Would beef do instead?" said Tarie. "Talk to Cook, anyway."

The next day, when she and Master Padror were out in the spare room, he held up a tattered book after he had buttoned up his breeches. "Erm, I heard what Master Nisroch said to you yesterday. I have a present for you, Mistress Tarie. All my children are all grown up, but when they were learning to read, they used this book—"

Tarie inspected the book. It had hand-drawn colourful pictures of various fruits, animals and things along with letters.

She put her chin up proudly. "Thank you kindly, Master Padror. But I can read."

"We all know you memorise the menu, our Tarie," said Padror, passing her some coins. "When Linnor changes it while you're not on, you have no idea and still use the old one."

Tarie blushed. "Damn." A lot of her life was devoted to memorising things so that she was not shamed, but she did not think that anyone had noticed, because she had an exceptional memory, and was very good at adding things up in her head.

She tucked the book in the special box of things she kept at work, including her "tips", and the note Nisroch had made of her name. When things were slow that afternoon, she got out Master Padror's book and Master Nisroch's note spelling out her name. She noticed that the first letter was "T" and that in the book, T was drawn with a spinning top. "T, t, t," she said under her breath. "Top, Tarie. T, t, t."

The next day when she saw Nisroch in the common room, she said proudly, "Master Nisroch! My name starts with a 'T' sound. Like top!"

Nisroch beamed at her like she was the best person in the whole world, and she felt a funny warm feeling inside. "TARIE! You are very clever! You are already doing VERRRRRY well! Only one day, and you are already knowing T! In five days, you will know all the letters of your name."

"Aye, I will start with the next letter tomorrow." No one had ever told her she was clever before.

"Can I be asking you something?" said Nisroch.

"Sure," said Tarie. "Do you want an extra pillow? And pie tonight is rabbit—"

"No, I don't want extra pillow. I wanting to know ... is you being married yet?"

Tarie stared at him and her jaw dropped. "Well, no! I'm nineteen, plenty of time for that!" She did not want to confess to Master Nisroch that she was not the kind of girl any respectable man thought to marry.

"In my country you would be married already at this age." Nisroch shrugged. "Anyway, now I am going to show my *café* beans to Master Baudhon, little man with moustache who was here last afternoon? His big Lord boss have very good taste in *café*, and is being disappointed with current supplier. I think the famous Nisroch can do better. My *café* fit for King, Emperor, not just big Lord boss."

He left and Linnor and Longnir looked at each other significantly.

"Mark my words, our Tarie, he's very keen on you," said Longnir. "I reckon he wants to marry you."

"That's silly of him," said Tarie. "Also, there is no way my Ma and Da would ever agree to me having a Haradric beau. Da would probably kill me and chop me up into bits. I'm not over twenty one, so I can't make my own choice."

Linnor shrugged and slurred, "A swarthy man is better than that useless Belben you were kind of seeing?"

"A dog on the street would be a better beau than our Belben," said Tarie, concentrating on polishing the glasses. "That doesn't count for much."

The 'Haradric Goat Stew with Beef Instead' proved almost as popular as the 'Genuine Haradric Stew'. It had been Tarie's idea to call it 'Haradric Goat Stew with Beef Instead'. They got several new diners who said that they wanted to try Goat Stew.

"There's not *actually* goat in it," said Tarie, as her mind processed the letters which spelled 'goat': two of the letters were the same as in her name. "We *do* say that in the name, that it's really beef. But it's a real recipe our Cook got from a real Haradrim. Look at him over there! It's our Master Nisroch!"

"I'm still curious," said the man, glancing at Nisroch in the corner, who waved. "I'd like to try it."

Nisroch thought it was hilarious. "There is being no goat! Why is Gondor people wondering about eating goat, anyway? I eat goat lots of time in Harad, and the *kamel*—"

"Different things are fascinating," said Tarie, and then thought that her words applied equally well to Master Nisroch as well.

Before Master Nisroch left this time, she went up to check his room and he beamed at her and paused in tying up his pack. "Mistress Tarie! It is the time I give you gift!"

"Really, Master Nisroch, I told you before, you don't *have* to get me gifts."

"I don't have to: no emperor is holding spear to my heart." Nisroch dramatically gestured towards his chest, as if he was being stabbed by a spear. "But I want to."

He pressed a packet into her hand, more elaborately wrapped than the last one, and then to her utter surprise, he swiftly kissed her on the cheek, not looking at her properly.

"I don't think I've *ever* seen you look shy before, Master Nisroch," said Tarie. "Well I *never*."

"You making me shy," complained Nisroch. "It is new feeling for me."

Tarie leaned over and kissed Nisroch on the lips, tenderly: he tasted of spice and *café*. His breathing changed and he said, "I thinking we should not really be alone in this room, if I being a good man."

"What I am wondering is—what are you like when you are not a good man?" murmured Tarie. "And are you the same colour all over?"

Nisroch bellowed with laughter. "Well! I wondering the same thing about *you*! But go, go now! I want to stay a good man. At least until I am back next time—"

* * * * *

The summer was waning the next time Master Nisroch came back, with an even bigger cart than last time. Tarie inspected it when she went to put out the rubbish and saw him in the courtyard. "Hullo Master Nisroch! You're bringing more things?"

"Yes, I am, my beautiful Mistress Tarie," said Nisroch, with great satisfaction. "I am doing well here in Minas Tirith: not many other Haradrim come direct. In fact, I am only one I know. The Harad trade is always through Dol Amroth and the Half-Elfish Prince—" He made a strange gesture with his hands.

"What's the end plan for all this trading?" said Tarie, dusting her hands down and wiping them on her apron.

"Make lots of money and marry beautiful, plump lady, and have fat babies with her," said Nisroch, looking at her significantly.

"People in Gondor don't like plump ladies." Tarie was distinctly aware that she was a little plumper than she should be, mostly on account of the free 'leftovers' Cook insisted upon giving her. "Did you ever see Queen Arwen? I saw her once in the distance. Eerily beautiful but thin as a bone, she is."

"Nothing to cuddle of this Queen then," said Nisroch, dismissively. "I never see her, but I not want to see her. A woman is no good if there is nothing to hold! You may as well hold a bag of bones!" His eyes sharpened as he looked her up and down. "I like a woman who has some *meat* on the bones! That is *real woman*!"

"Ah well, the King seems to like the Queen," said Tarie, ignoring his look. "He's awful tall and thin too, though, so I guess he's part Elf too?"

"They only have one son yet, no?" said Nisroch, grimacing and making the strange gesture again. "Harad is noting this, and we is noting Lord Steward is doing proper thing."

Tarie laughed. "Aye, our Lord Faramir and his Lady pop them out like peas from the shell, so they say. I can't remember how many they have now, but there's at least eight? Maybe nine? I can't even say, but I know they had another one lately, a little girl, they said. But a lot of them are boys—"

"This is being proper way to behave," said Nisroch. "King should hurry up, have more sons, lest Steward's sons take over?"

"O, our Lord Faramir and his children would never do *that*," said Tarie.

"You would be surprised," said Nisroch, darkly. "In Harad, this kind of thing is happening all the time."

"Nay, the Lord Faramir isn't like that," said Tarie. "He's a very, very good man. We all love him. Of course his Da was different, they say: but even *he'd* never take the throne, and that was when it was empty. Mind his Da was, if possible, even worse than my Da—I don't think my Da's tried to murder me with fire yet?"

Nisroch's black brows drew down, and he put his hand on her arm gently. "Your father is being cruel to you?"

Tarie flinched away from him. "That's why I work here, to keep away from him, and to get a bit of extra money for our Ma and the other children—"

Nisroch frowned and put his hand to his beard, looking worried. "Marry me, Tarie."

Tarie gaped at him. "Don't be *totally* ridiculous! You don't want to marry the likes of me!"

"Why not?" said Nisroch.

"I can't marry you! I can't!" Tarie was too ashamed to tell him about what she did to get the "tips" she stored in the box under the bar away from her Da: she wasn't a night walker, but there were certain things she'd do, or allow someone to do, for a little extra. "Also, my father would kill me if I married ... well, I can't say as how he'd describe you, because it isn't nice. He'd never give you permission, and I'm less than twenty one years of age."

Nisroch looked her in the eyes. "I will persuade you. It will take time but I will. If I am determined, I do a thing—"

"I need to get back to work." Tarie walked back into the common room, and went behind the bar. Nisroch followed her in.

"Master Nisroch!" said Longnir. "Welcome back to Minas Tirith. What have you been doing since we last saw you?"

"Hullo my Gondor friends! I been trying to persuade Mistress Tarie to marry me," said Nisroch, with perfect equanimity, as Tarie blushed horrendously.

"Hah!" said Longnir. "You've been trying to persuade her all this time?"

Nisroch laughed. "No, only just now. I have been getting the spice and the *café* beans and the silk, and the other good things Harad is having, and taking the good things of Gondor back to Harad. You need the spices? The *café* beans? The silk?"

"What *are* the good things of Gondor?" said Linnor.

"Loooooots of good things. Sugar. Salt. Wood. Linen. Pipe weed," said Nisroch.

"Pipe weed is from Arnor, technically," said Longnir. "You know the King smokes it?"

"Yes, I using this to sell back to Haradrim," said Nisroch. "I say, 'King of Gondor and Arnor, he is smoking this leaf!' We using the *hookah* to smoke the same."

"I never heard of one of them," said Tarie.

"It is a kind of water pipe with a tube," said Nisroch. "How is the reading and the letters going, Tarie?"

“Hang on, I’ll get a piece of paper for her,” said Longnir, and bustled out to his office. He came back with a pen and paper. Tarie took it off him and painstakingly wrote her name, sticking her tongue out with the effort of it, and sounded out what each letter was.

Nisroch clapped and beamed at her. “EXCELLENT! You are amazing! Your writing is beautiful, just like you.”

Then he walked out, whistling.

“Watch out, our Tarie,” Linnor slurred, waving his finger in a wobbly manner. “There’s one determined man!”

“I told him just now that I *can’t* marry him. Da would kill me. He hates Haradrim. He’d never give permission. Nay, it’s just a very silly idea of our poor Master Nisroch’s—he doesn’t really understand what I am, on account of him being foreign. He’s far too nice to be stuck with someone like me—”

“Hah!” said Longnir. “So ... if it wasn’t for your Da, then, what would you say?”

“It’s not even worth thinking about what I would say if our Da wasn’t about,” said Tarie, wiping down the bench very carefully and fastidiously. “The fact is, he is around and there’s naught I can do about it until I’m twenty one, Master Longnir. And our Ma’s never going to go against him, is she?”

Several days later, Master Longnir had a special night for the end of the Summer. Cook made special cold meats and berry pies. Tarie loved berry pies.

They did a brisk trade. Several patrons bought Tarie an extra ale when they bought their own, and she felt a bit tipsy.

“I am liking berries in the pie,” said Nisroch from his seat at the bar. “There is not this in Harad, because there is not berries. There is sheeps cheese and spinach pastry with flaky dough?”

“That sounds nice,” said Tarie, leaning over the bar. “Can you get it here? Or maybe make it?”

“I have never found it,” said Nisroch sadly, his brown eyes huge. “And I not know how to make that one. It is from Horondor in North Harad.”

Tarie put her pale hand over his dark brown hand. “Poor Master Nisroch.”

Nisroch beamed at her suddenly. “I will not be poor Nisroch if you marry me, Tarie?”

“Don’t be silly,” said Tarie, sharply, and removed her hand and went to the other end of the bar.

“If you want that swarthy man to stop proposing marriage every time he speaks to you, you have to stop leaning over and showing him your lovely ample assets,” said Master Prestion at the other end of the bar, cupping his hands in front of his chest. “It’s really not fair to the poor man.”

“I’m certainly not showing *you* my ample assets for naught,” said Tarie, pulling up her top. It was true: her top had come down a little, and she had shown Nisroch much more than she had realised.

Eventually, Master Longnir closed down the bar. Only Nisroch and Linnor remained.

Longnir looked at them both. "Maybe they can sleep on the tables?"

Tarie sighed. "I'll take Master Nisroch up to his room. I'll wager he's not that used to ale: he didn't have *that* much. We can put Master Linnor in the spare room I sometimes use?"

"Aye, good idea; I'll take him," said Longnir.

Tarie roused Nisroch and helped him up the stairs, his arm over her shoulder.

"I am still wondering something from last visit—" said Nisroch, when they got to his room.

"What are you wondering?" said Tarie.

"—whether you are that colour all over," said Nisroch, beaming at her, as she settled him on the bed.

Tarie pulled up her bodice up again and stepped back. "The answer is, yes, if you must know."

Nisroch stood up. "I love you, Tarie."

"What?" said Tarie, in shock. "You're not thinking right, Master Nisroch, because you're drunk. You can't love someone like me. You'll think better of it tomorrow. I should go now."

Nisroch ignored her, said something in a different language, and put his arms around her.

"So: are you actually that colour all over?" said Tarie.

"I can show you?" said Nisroch.

"Why not?" said Tarie. In fact she could think of any number of reasons as to why this was a *very* bad idea, but at this moment it did not really seem to matter that much.

Nisroch kissed her mouth and cheeks, and then slowly kissed down her neck and chest. "So pale. Like a white bird. Like a dove. Tarie, you are my dove."

He gently pulled the pins and combs out of her hair, dropped them on the floor, and as her hair tumbled down, he drew in his breath and patted her hair. "So long, so soft, like silk, so straight; I dreaming of your white skin and your black hair, but I not imagine you so soft—"

Tarie laughed, but she was startled to realise that she felt aroused. "Can I look at you, then? You did say I could—"

Nisroch stripped off his strange green dress. "There! You are seeing now: I am being the same colour all over."

"O my," said Tarie, with wide eyes, breathing out and looking at his stocky, muscular dark chest with admiration and lust. "*O my—*"

Nisroch put his arms around her and began to unbutton the back of her dress. "So let me see your colour: are you my dove all over—?"

As her dress slipped off, and Nisroch began to kiss her breasts, Tarie said breathlessly, “I *need* you, Nisroch.”

“You do,” said Nisroch, with satisfaction. “I am glad you are realising this.”

In the end they did not make it to his bed. He took her up against the wall. Then they got into his bed and fell asleep.

Tarie woke in the morning with a slightly aching head, wondering where she was, and then she rolled over and saw the naked man lying next to her. “O, hullo Master Nisroch.”

Nisroch opened his eyes and smiled at her. “Now, my dove, you have to marry me.”

“Nay, that’s not how it works,” said Tarie. “Anyway, I can’t. Da won’t let me. And I don’t want to hear him say rude things about you. You’re too nice to have to deal with that.”

Nisroch slapped his bare chest. “I am tough! Tough enough to deal with rude father.” He stood up and turned around, putting his back to her. “See, I show you!”

The first thing Tarie noticed was that he had very nice tight brown buttocks, but after that, she noticed that his back was criss-crossed with pale scar lines.

“What is that?” she said.

“My uncle and father is beating me when I was a boy,” said Nisroch. “I am showing you I can deal with rude fathers.”

“I don’t want my Da beating you,” said Tarie. “By the way, your bottom is lovely.”

Nisroch turned back around and beamed at her. “Not as lovely as your beautiful pale, plump backside. I just want to take it in my hands and hold it, forever—”

Tarie threw back the covers and said, “Be my guest.”

Nisroch laughed. “I am your guest! I am guest of the public house!”

“No, that’s not what it means: it means be welcome. Like a guest.” Tarie winked and spread her legs. “You’re welcome inside...”

“You are funny woman. I accept your invitation.”

Afterwards, Tarie said drowsily, “You’re much better than anyone I ever had before.”

Nisroch looked superior. “But of course! I am Nisroch! Always doing the best!”

“You are very hardworking,” said Tarie. “It’s admirable. They say here that Haradrim are lazy—”

“Maybe this is because we is not being so keen about Sauron’s War—” said Nisroch, thoughtfully. “We are not stupid people. We know we picked bad and mean side, but how to get out of it?”

"I should probably go home to my parents' house and get fresh clothes," said Tarie. "But thank you. That was fun."

"Marry me and we can do it for rest of our lives," said Nisroch, stretching. "I will cook *kari* for you, every day, and dress you in silk and jewels."

"You are relentless, our Nisroch," said Tarie.

"Yes, I am," said Nisroch proudly. "I will persuade you."

Tarie leaned over and kissed him after she had dressed and put her hair back up. "Good bye."

She tried to slip down the stairs, but Master Longnir caught her coming down. "O dear, Tarie," he said. "What *are* you doing?"

"Just going home," said Tarie, blushing, as Master Longnir shook his head.

When she got home to the cramped little house her family lived in, her father was sitting at the kitchen table as her mother made breakfast. Her siblings looked at her with wide eyes.

"Hullo—" said Tarie.

Her father hit her across the face. "You little *whore*! Where have you been?"

"At a friend's house," said Tarie, blinking back tears as she held her eye.

"Lying little tart," said her father. "Where's your money?"

Tarie reached into her bodice and brought it out. "It's here, Da." Then she went off and rinsed her face and held a wet cloth to her eye.

"You're in *big* trouble, our Tarie," said her little sister Esteldes, following her into their tiny shared bedroom. "You were with a man again, weren't you?"

"It's none of your business," said Tarie, taking her glory box out from under her mattress, and looking at the various gifts from Nisroch: the green beads, the pink silk scarf, the bracelets, the earrings, the little embroidered purse with some strange Haradric beast on it.

Esteldes's eyes widened. "Where did you get all this *stuff*? Are you some rich man's mistress?" She peered at it again, and whistled. "It's all Haradric stuff—?"

Tarie blushed and put the lid back on the box. "Nay, of course I'm not."

"Are you swyving a Haradrim then?" said Esteldes.

Tarie shoved the box back under her mattress. "Just *go away*, Esteldes."

"By the Valar, Da's going to murder you and hang you from the walls, our Tarie," said Esteldes in awe.

"I'm not doing nothing," said Tarie. Then she had a nap, because she found that she was rather weary after the night's exertions and her father's rage. She dressed and got ready for the night shift.

Master Longnir grabbed her as she came in. "*Tarie!* That wasn't there when I saw you this morning?" Tarie caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror in the hall and saw that she had developed a swollen purple and red bruise around her left eye, which explained why it was getting harder to see out of that eye.

"Walked into a door at home."

"Ah, present from your Da, then?" said Longnir, his long face grim.

"It's the kind of present he often gives women, isn't it?"

"Mmm," said Longnir. "Maybe you should think about Master Nisroch's proposal."

"Well, I don't really think our Master Nisroch knows what he's asking—you don't think he's serious, do you?—and Da's got to agree, and he's never going to do that?"

Later in the afternoon, Nisroch came in beaming, and then he saw Tarie's face.

"TARIE!" he boomed, his black brows drawing tight.

"Uh oh," said Linnor.

"Now we'll have trouble," said Padror with excitement. "Do you think he'll go kill Tarie's Da?"

"WHO IS DOING THIS?" yelled Nisroch, pounding his fists on the bar. "WHO IS HITTING YOUR BEAUTIFUL FACE?"

"Er, I walked into a door," said Tarie, turning her face away from him, and cowering.

"RUBBISH!" said Nisroch. "There was no doors in your eye this morning?"

"It's her Da," said Cook, coming out from the kitchen, his hands on his hips. "Old bastard. I've threatened to hit him."

"Please don't, Cook: he'll just take it out on Ma and my siblings," sighed Tarie. "You know that's how it always goes."

"NOW YOU MUST MARRY ME, MY DOVE!" bellowed Nisroch. "I CANNOT ABIDE THIS!"

"Don't be silly," said Tarie, sadly. "Also Da wouldn't agree. He hates Haradrim."

"AND I HATE HIM! HE IS BAD MAN." Nisroch drew in a deep breath and flung out an arm. "There is bad mans everywhere. Bad mans in Harad, bad mans in Gondor, bad mans in Elfland, everywhere. Whether you bad man or not is not because you are from Harad or Gondor or Elfland, but because you is behaving bad."

Padror applauded. "Well said, Master Nisroch."

"I thought there wasn't supposed to be bad men in Elfland," said Tarie.

"What did they teach you in lessons?" said Linnor. "Of course there was: remember Morgoth was one of the Valar! And that whole business with the Silmarils—"

"I didn't get no lessons," said Tarie, putting her chin up.

"O, that's right," said Linnor.

"What is being Silmarils and Valar?" said Nisroch. Tarie was really glad he asked: she'd never understood that either: she just knew that 'By the Valar' was a curse word.

"Godless Haradrim," said Linnor to him, without any rancour.

"I went to *madrassa* for five years," said Nisroch. "I being educated man. I speaking Haradric, Khandian, Umbarian and Westron. How many language you speak, Master Linnor?"

"Westron and a bit of Sindarin," said Linnor. "I was only teasing."

At the end of her shift, Nisroch said, "I needing to talk to you after you finish, Mistress Tarie."

"Very well," said Tarie, putting the polishing cloth back behind the bar. "Let's talk."

"Not here," said Nisroch.

Longnir leaned over the bar with interest, and several of the regular patrons who had been about to leave began to dither.

Tarie turned and glared at them all. "Shoo! Shoo! Private business!"

"Oooh," said Prestion. "Touchy."

Tarie took off her apron and hit him on the backside with it. "Go away!" She tossed the apron to Longnir, and then turned to Nisroch. "Where should we talk?"

"Upstairs?" said Nisroch.

Tarie shrugged. "You'd better be quick. I need to get home."

"Well, I just wanting to say I very, very sorry you got hit by father," said Nisroch as Tarie followed him up the stairs. "And I hope you not regretting—" he lowered his voice to a booming whisper "*—things* that is happening yesterday?"

"First, it's not your fault that Da hit me. Never think that," said Tarie, as he unlocked the door to his room. "But secondly, you're not quite accurate, our Nisroch. It was today as well: remember this morning—?"

Nisroch laughed as they went into his room. "This is true."

Tarie looked at him speculatively as he closed the door. "And ... I hope you don't mind if I ask ... but ... what about now? Now that we're up in your room and all those other people are gone?"

Nisroch put his hand up to her face and stroked her cheek softly, and the hairs on her arms prickled. "I am not at all sorry you asking. You will not be hit again, my dove?" He gently kissed her brow.

"Nay, not if I go home this time. No one need know—"

There was no more conversation as they hurried to remove their clothing, and fell onto his bed.

For the rest of Nisroch's stay in Minas Tirith, Tarie went up to his room at the end of her shifts before she went home. No one said anything, apart from the time when she disturbed the person in the neighbouring room. "Oi! Pipe down! Some of us are trying to sleep in this public house!"

"Sorry," called Tarie, giggling.

Nisroch leaned down and kissed her. "My dove: so loud and enthusiastic. So different from most people in this City. You are refreshment to me. You enjoy everything so much ... it is like you are properly living in your skin ..."

Tarie felt a little as if a kind of madness had inflicted her: she needed more and more of Nisroch's touch. She started coming early before her shifts and visiting him then too. She was not looking forward to him leaving.

"Marry me," Nisroch said in the common room, on the day he departed, kneeling in the middle of the room, much to everyone's amusement.

"Nay," said Tarie. "You can't mean it."

To her shock, he prostrated himself on the floor in a strange posture, face down on the floor, with his arms outstretched to her. "Please ... marry me," he said in muffled tones.

"By the Valar, can you just *marry* him already, Tarie?" said Prestion. "I feel as though I am reading the same sentence over and over again in a book. I am uncomfortable seeing him splayed out on the floor like that."

"It looks a bit awkward," Galasor agreed. "He does *really, really* seem to want to marry you, Tarie? He says it every night, at least once? And we all know you're swyving him—?"

"Don't be silly, Galasor—and Da won't agree to it, Prestion," said Tarie, bursting into tears, and holding her apron to her face.

"That's on account of your Da can't deal with a swarthy man being a better man than him," said Cook, coming out, waving a spoon.

"Go away, Cook," said Tarie, still sobbing.

"I love you, Tarie, my dove," said Nisroch, getting back up again off the floor. He was wearing a vermillion dress and navy trousers: a particularly eye-watering combination. Tarie had come to enjoy seeing what crazy bright thing he would wear that day. Then he said something long and serious in his own language.

"What was the gibberish?" said Linnor.

"A prayer in my language," said Nisroch. "It is that I will make Tarie my wife next time I visit."

"Damn, you're going to break my heart, you silly swarthy man," said Linnor. "Bring me more ale, our Tarie, so I don't feel sorry for him any more."

Tarie sighed and sniffled into her apron. "Good bye, our Nisroch."

* * * *

Three weeks after Nisroch had left, Master Prestion stared at Tarie and said, "Mistress Tarie, but are you wearing a new style of dress or something? Because I cannot help noticing that your lovely ample assets ... are looking even more ample!"

Tarie flipped him with a tea towel and winked. "Don't look at my assets, Master Prestion, you bad man!" Then she glanced down and blinked. "I do see what you mean, though. Goodness me, I'm near popping out of this dress!" She tugged at the bodice of her dress, and tried to pull it up. Before the next shift she added some scraps of lace and material to her dresses.

Another week had gone past when Tarie started to get a bad feeling in her gut: a combination of nervousness, sadness and ... something else. She did not want to think about it. In fact, she resolutely did not think about it, although she had noticed certain other *signs*, which if she thought about them too hard, would indicate something very worrying indeed. She hoped if she ignored it, it would just go away magically.

After two more weeks, she was no longer able to ignore it. Cook and Master Longnir caught her retching in the courtyard into the rubbish tip.

"O by the Valar, you *silly* girl, Tarie," said Longnir, rubbing his hand over his bald head.

"No! NO! Don't say anything!" said Tarie, flinching. "Particularly don't tell our Da."

Cook grimaced. "He's going to have to know eventually: you won't be able to pretend for much longer."

Tarie put her hands over her ears and turned away. "I'm not listening to you."

"You could get rid of it?" said Cook.

"Our Ma almost died after trying to get rid of one of us," said Tarie. "I'm not doing it, Cook. She's had bad bleeding ever since, and it never even worked."

"Is there any way you can get in contact with our Master Nisroch?" said Longnir. "Because I'm guessing from the way you two have been carrying on—he'd probably want some say in this?"

"I've no idea how to get in contact with him," said Tarie, blushing. "I'll just have to wait for him to come back. I don't believe a word of that nonsense about him marrying me, but he might—I don't know—give us something?"

"It's definitely his, isn't it?" said Cook, folding his arms. "I haven't noticed you with anyone else for some time—"

Tarie nodded. "Aye, he's the Da, no doubt at all—and I never, ever did *that* kind of thing for tips, Cook. I'm not a night walker!"

Cook scratched his pink, bald pate with his blunt fingers. "What happens if a very brown man and a very white woman have a baby? Is it like a mix of the two: kind of mid-brown?"

"I guess we'll find out," said Longnir, sighing.

Tarie did her absolute best to hide what was going on at home. No one in her family noticed that she was ill, but they eventually noticed when she started to show, despite the fact that she'd bound her belly with cloth. Her mother stared at her one morning at breakfast.

"Our Tarie! You're ... pregnant!"

"No I'm not! I'm just fat," said Tarie, and tried to suck in the growing bulge as much as she could. She could feel the baby kicking nervously, as if it was infected by her own anxiety. "I ate too many pies at work."

Her father backhanded her so hard she fell to the ground. "You lying slut! Who's the father? Tell me and I'll kill him!"

He went to kick Tarie in the belly, and her maternal instinct came into play: she didn't want her little jiggling child to be hurt. Tarie curled up. "Don't hurt my baby!" Her father's foot hit her thigh instead.

"The father's some kind of foreign dark man," said Esteldes. "He's been giving her all these gifts. I saw them in her glory box."

"Esteldes!" cried Tarie.

Her father strode off and came back with the open glory box. His eyes widened as he scanned the contents. "You dirty little whore, Tarie!" he said, holding up the green beads which had been Nisroch's first present to her. Then he put the beads on the floor, and crunched them under his foot as Tarie wept to see her present crushed thus.

Her father flung the box across the kitchen. "Get out. You're no daughter of mine, if you swyve a Haradrim. You're dead to my eyes."

"Da!" said Tarie.

"Get out," said her father. He went to her room, took her meagre collection of clothes and threw them out the window.

"Ma?" said Tarie, holding out her hands to her mother.

"Sorry, Tarie," mouthed her mother, and turned her back on her.

Her father essayed a kick at her, and Tarie fled, weeping, before he could hurt her baby. She picked up the clothing on the street and limped to the Sword and Goblet.

"I've been thrown out of home," she said to Longnir, sobbing.

Longnir shepherded her in through the common room and out the back. "Well, you are starting to ... show. I guess your Da worked out you're expecting?"

"Worse, Esteldes told him about our Nisroch," said Tarie. "They're never going to have me back."

"Give them a few days, and I'll talk to them," said Longnir. "I'm sure they'll take you back if I reason with them. For the meantime, you can sleep in the spare room. It's not much bigger than a cupboard, but it's better than nothing."

Tarie lay down in the tiny truckle bed and cried until she fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

For the next few days, she worked behind the counter as normal. Longnir disappeared one afternoon, and came back. He did not tell her where he had been, but she overheard him talking to Cook. "Aye, so her bastard of a Da says he never wants to see her again—isn't going to move on that. Maybe she's better off without that family of hers? Never seemed to do much for her anyway—"

Tarie went to her room and wept. She knew that her family were not ideal, but she had thought that in some way they loved her. To know that they were prepared to cut her off hurt more than she had been expecting.

She tried to use her tips to pay Longnir for the use of the spare room, but he refused to take her coin. The regulars were very kind to her. They kept turning up with random dresses that their wives or sisters just happened not to need any more. Most of the dresses were far too long, but Tarie spent the evenings taking the hems up and letting the dresses out. The baby was starting to stick out.

Nisroch was taking longer to turn up than usual. Tarie worried that he had been killed or maybe that he had decided that he did not like Gondor or her any more. The other regulars whispered about it too, particularly on the nights that they served Haradric Stew, but always quieted when she got near.

In late autumn, on a rainy night, a man came into the common room, reminding Tarie of when she had first met Nisroch. Everyone hushed.

The man pushed off his hood, and looked around, confused. "It is just being me, Nisroch. I am wet and wearing hood, in case you are not recognising me."

Everyone in the common room turned to look at Tarie. Her eyes were filling with tears: she was so scared he would reject her too. She had given up on him coming back. She came out from behind the bar, and put her hands on her stomach where her baby was—their baby.

"Hullo our Nisroch," she said, as tears spilled from her eyes, splashing all down her front. "I missed you."

Nisroch gaped. After a moment where he stood utterly still, like a dark stone statue, he ran to her and grabbed her in a bear hug. "TARIE, MY DOVE! BEAUTIFUL MOTHER OF MY BABY!"

Tarie hugged him back, crying and crying: all the hurt and sadness of the past weeks and months coming out in a rush.

"Now we is having lovely fat baby together, will you *finally* marry me?" said Nisroch.

"Aye, you silly man," sobbed Tarie into his neck.

"Thank the Valar," sighed Prestion. "I didn't want him to prostrate himself on the floor again."

"I think I have a little something in my eye," said Linnor. "Dust, I am sure."

Cook came out from the kitchen, flexing his big muscular arms. "I am going to find a magistrate. I want to ensure this marriage really happens, and Tarie doesn't try and get out of this because she thinks she's worthless, or in order to get taken back by her father?"

"Taken back by father?" said Nisroch, his arm firmly around her. "What is happening?"

"He threw me out," snivelled Tarie. "He said I'm dead to his eyes."

"He is stupid man," said Nisroch, dismissively, waving his hand. "If he disown you, he have no say in who you marry. You not need to worry. You marrying NISROCH now. I will be looking after you; no, I will be *spoiling* you."

"He stepped on the green beads you gave me when we first met, Nisroch," said Tarie, starting to cry again. "He crushed them under his feet."

"I will get you better than green beads. I will be getting you emeralds, my dove, never mind," said Nisroch, wiping the tears off her face.

Cook came back holding the arm of a slightly bemused-looking man in a very smart, clean suit, still with a white table napkin tucked into his shirt.

"I was *actually* having dinner," the man said, as he looked around at the patrons with horror, and Tarie thought, a kind of terrified awe. "I really should not have admitted to you that I'm a magistrate—"

"But it's very urgent," said Cook, scowling. "You need to marry this couple. We will give you a free meal and as much drink as you want! We've Haradric Goat Stew with Beef Instead tonight! Real recipe provided by our handsome groom here!"

The magistrate stared at Tarie's belly, and took a piece of paper from his jacket. "Well, yes, it does look like a marriage is somewhat overdue in this case, although I've had much worse. One wedding I officiated, the bride's waters broke half way through the ceremony." He poised his pen over the paper. "Lucky I had a spare certificate in my jacket. How old are these two? Do we need permission from the parents? What are the names, for the records office, when I register this? Where are they from?"

"I'm nineteen, my name's Tarie and I'm from Minas Tirith" said Tarie. "But no need to get Da's permission, cos he and Ma have disowned me for being with a Haradrim."

"What she says is true, and I'll witness that," said Longnir, and Cook nodded.

"I am being twenty four years, and my name is Nisroch." Nisroch shrugged, while Tarie looked at him with surprise. She had thought he was older than that. "My parents is in South Harad and this is where I born, town of Karaz, near Qarshoom."

"You will have to spell those names on the certificate for me, Master," said the magistrate. "Hand fasting?"

"Yes," said Cook firmly, his hand still locked on the magistrate's arm.

"Does anyone have a ribbon?" said the magistrate.

Tarie pulled the ribbon from her hair.

"Very well," said the magistrate. "Come on, hold hands so I can go back to my dinner." After a swift ceremony, he got them to sign the piece of paper. Tarie signed her name extremely proudly; Nisroch signed both in Westron lettering and Haradric.

"Hurrah!" said Pador. "Go on, kiss her, Nisroch! You know you want to!"

"Indeed I am wanting to kiss my WIFE," said Nisroch, and as Tarie laughed, he kissed her very thoroughly.

"Eh, eh, that's enough!" said Prestion. "You're making the rest of us jealous."

"Drinks all around, my friends! And the Goat Stew with no goats!" cried Nisroch. "On me as new husband!"

"Farewell to all," said the magistrate, with wide eyes, as Cook let go of him. "I'll lodge the certificate tomorrow!" He darted out before anyone could stop him.

"Is you not wondering why I take longer to come back to Minas Tirith this time, my dove?" said Nisroch.

"I thought maybe I'd refused your proposals too many times?" said Tarie. "Or worse that you were dead—"

"No, I was *negotiating*," said Nisroch. "The place next to the fabric merchants is for lease. I am hiring it, for good price."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I AM SETTING UP NISROCH'S HARADRIC TRADE OFFICE!" said Nisroch. He turned to the room and flung out an arm. "My friends, you all come to me, you get discount because you are my friend. You refer someone, you get even better discount."

Tarie gaped. "You're ... coming to live here?"

"Yes," said Nisroch, beaming. "I thought if I had place to stay here you might marry me! And now we are married and it will be place for you and me and baby! I hope he is being beautiful fat baby. Big fat babies is the best."

“Personally I hope he is not so fat that he doesn’t want to come out,” said Tarie, faintly.

Nisroch bent down and spoke to her stomach in Haradric, then stood up. “I telling him to be good boy or girl, and be good to his Umma, and come out as easily as he can,” he explained to the room.

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They did try to talk again to Tarie’s parents. Tarie’s Da threw a punch at Nisroch, and Nisroch dodged it and punched him back. Tarie suspected from the angle of it that Nisroch had broken her Da’s nose.

“Take that slut of a woman away,” said Da, clutching his bloodied nose. “She’s no daughter of mine. She’s a cheap whore, you realise? Sucks men off for extra money, or gives them a feel in the back room of the inn—”

“You are fool,” said Nisroch. “My wife is wonderful woman and you are not appreciating her. When we are rich and famous you will regret this.”

“Go swyve yourself,” said Da.

“Fare thee well, our Tarie,” said Ma.

Her younger siblings burst into tears. “Farewell,” said Tarie. “I still love you all, even though you don’t love me. You can still come to me if you need me.” Then she stumbled away, crying.

Nisroch took her back to the place he had rented, and wiped her face down with a silk handkerchief, kissing her as he did so. “My dove, my dove, forget them. I not have much family, and you not have family now, but we having each other.”

“Did you understand what he meant when he told you to go swyve yourself?” said Tarie.

Nisroch laughed. “First words of Westron I learn as a boy is swear words! Of course I understanding, but I not need to swyve myself, because I have beautiful wife to swyve—”

“Oooh,” said Tarie. “Now there’s a thought! How long can we keep doing this with the baby?”

“I guess you check with a midwife? But I think it’s fine now,” said Nisroch. “You are having no problems or pain?”

“Not at all,” said Tarie, looking at the mattress on the floor. “But should I be on top again?”

“Well, yes, that is fun—” said Nisroch, grinning, and beginning to take off his *djellaba*.

Afterwards, Tarie tied up her hair, and coiled it in a bun, and said, “What do your Ma and Da think of all this?”

Nisroch shrugged. “I don’t ask them. They have to live with it.”

“They don’t know about me?” said Tarie.

"No. Maybe one day I take you back there, and you will see why I come to live here from the one-camel village of Karaz, my dove." Nisroch propped himself up on one elbow. "We will build our own family. We not hitting our babies."

"Nay," said Tarie, her eyes filling with tears. "I'm lucky you walked into the public house, that day."

"I could have been going to another public house," said Nisroch. "I *did* go to four public houses. They said, all full for you, swarthy man. And then I went to your one, and you say, let me help you, here is a towel, what is your name, here is pie and soup. You are loveliest woman I ever meet. So warm! So kind! I love you from that moment."

"It took me a long time to believe that you loved me, and that you really were going to marry me," said Tarie, putting her dress back on. "But you're a wonderful man. I thought you were handsome, polite and generous from the very start."

"Do not worry," said Nisroch seriously. "For you and our baby: I will do everything. I will work until fingers is bleeding. I will be success, and I will give you comfort."

"You are already a success. Don't think I haven't noticed that you've been doing better every time you come. It's like you more than double the things you have every time you come back!"

Nisroch pointed at her. "See! Another reason I love you. You understand what it is to sell something. You sold the Goat Stew with No Goats, and I still laughing about it when I lonely on the road. I am thinking ... I am thinking you have head for trade too, my dove."

Tarie grasped his strong brown hand. "We'll be a good team: you, me and our baby."

"Yes, yes, we will. Minas Tirith is not knowing how good we are, yet." Nisroch beamed, showing his lovely straight white teeth. "But they will be."