

Captain Rador goes to a wedding

Rador stared at the plate his wife put in front of him. "There is *green* on it, Talvel," he said accusingly.

His wife beamed at him. "Isn't it marvellous! I do not know where they got such lovely greens in mid-winter: could you ask Idis, after she gets back from honeymoon, of course? I also got you honey-glazed ham and the confit of duck and goose, of course, as well as smoked trout, and these lovely little potatoes here, rolled in butter—"

His junior, Barthon, leaned over. "My Lady Talvel, he does not usually eat green things. His main diet, to the extent that he eats at all, is kebabs from Haradric street stalls—"

"Tsk tsk, Lieutenant, do not give away my trade secrets!" said Rador. "My observational skills are *honed* by Haradric spiced fried meat!"

He pointedly ate the ham first and pushed the greens to the side with his fork. Talvel was right: the ham was juicy and delicious. He had no idea how Idis's family had managed to put on such a magnificent wedding feast in mid-winter at short notice.

"The bride looks very, very happy," said Talvel. "I deem she has not stopped smiling since the ceremony finished."

"They both look relieved now it is over," said Barthon. "I thought Pretty Boy Genius was going to faint while he was waiting for Idis to arrive."

Next to Barthon, Lord Romdaer, the First Trade Attaché to Gondor's Embassy to Harad made no response to Barthon's nickname for his colleague Thor. Instead he gazed at the newlywed couple seated the main table on the dais, and said in low voice, "I envy them."

Rador glanced at Romdaer's pretty wife Lalaith, to see if she had caught this, but she was concentrating on demolishing a plate heaped only with slices of honey-glazed ham. After finding out early during the feast that no one at the table had an interest in soap, she had said, "Why are we here again, darling Romdaer? And who did you say those people were?" Romdaer had patiently explained why they were there. "O!" Lalaith had said, "I never know anyone from your office: I have no interest in Nasty Harad."

Rador surmised that they had evidently been placed on a 'servants of government' table, which had meant sharing a table not only with Master Nefreon the Coroner, but also several men from the Foreign Office, who served on missions as varied as Rohan, Harad and Mordor, and a random man from the Forestry Office and his pregnant wife. The younger diplomats were enjoying the wine very much. Master Nefreon had disappeared somewhere after saying he was going to fetch food.

Rador finished off his plate, leaving the green vegetables until last. "Green is nice for a dress, not so lovely for food," he noted.

"The clothing for this wedding *is* lovely," said Talvel. "All in greens, like the forest."

"I like green, and those people do look very handsome and sweet," said Lalaith. She turned to her husband. "How did you say you knew the bride and groom again, darling Romdaer?"

"Thorongil works with me," said Romdaer. "He met Idis because I asked Thorongil to fetch a document for me from the Great Archives." This was the fourth time he had explained this to his wife.

"I believe Idis's sister Morwen was responsible for the clothing," said Rador. "Idis told me she did not really care." He decided not to repeat Idis's comment that she would be quite happy to get married naked: his response had been that no one else (including the groom) would be happy with that.

"Who is going to replace Idis?" said Talvel.

Rador and Barthon looked at each other. They had not really liked to think about it. "We were thinking of asking her brother Ecthelion?" said Barthon.

"Which one is he?" said Talvel.

Rador scanned the room, and spotted a tall, pretty, somewhat drunken man sitting with a group of Riders of Rohan. "That one, over there."

"My! He looks like Idis!" said Talvel. "They are not twins, are they?"

"Do *not* suggest that to Idis," said Barthon. "Nothing is more likely to irritate her!"

"While I have him here, I could always ask him?" said Rador.

"Can you not just stop working for one day?" snapped Talvel.

"Not really," said Rador, and stood. Now that he had noted Ecthelion, he wanted to lay the groundwork. He headed over to that side of the room, trailed by Barthon, but was trapped by Master Nefreon.

"Rador!" said Nefreon with intense excitement. "You will never guess who this is?"

Rador looked at the dark-haired man sitting with Nefreon. "Someone from Dol Amroth?" he hazarded. The man possessed the slightly Elven look they all had.

"It is *Lord Amrothos*," said Nefreon, in tones of extreme reverence. "The author of *The Body of Man, a Study in Dissection*! Lord Amrothos, this is Captain Rador of the Minas Tirith City Guard."

"I have rather moved away from studies of the body of man, these days," said the dark-haired man, showing no interest in Rador at all. "My current interest as of this week is algal bloom, because a rather interesting one appeared in the Bay of Belfalas! It is phosphorescent, with a blue-ish glow. Now, if I could reproduce that effect in other things, imagine how interesting it would be?"

"What would it be useful for?" said Rador.

"I do not actually know!" said Amrothos. "But is most interesting: I first saw the effect in Minas Morgul, when I demolished it, and I have been thinking about uses since that time! Perhaps painting books in phosphorescent paint so one can still read in the middle of the night? Because really, I think that would be convenient."

“Or one could just light a lamp or a candle, if one wanted to read in the middle of the night,” said Rador.

“But that is no *fun*,” said Amrothos.

“Lord Amrothos and Lady Nilofar have also detailed the effects of many poisons, most helpfully, with hamsters,” said Nefreon.

“Hamsters?” said Barthor.

Amrothos turned to him with an intense grey-eyed gaze. “Yes! Hamsters! So that we do not get them mixed up with local mice! They must be distinguishable! Hamster Number 154 escaped and lived in the wall for a while: we could hear it scratching, but we knew it would not interbreed with the local mice, which was a relief.”

“What happened to it in the end?” said Rador.

“It fell down the wall and died,” said Amrothos. “We heard a squeak and a thump, and then there was an unpleasant smell. Nilofar had to get Igorion to open the wall to get it out. Mind you, we learned some quite interesting things about decomposition as a result—”

“Did its eyes shrivel first?” said Nefreon.

“Ants got into the wall and ate the eyes, through a hole between the bricks,” said Amrothos. “But it decomposed much faster once out of the wall so Igor is now looking at insulation and the effect on decomposition of dead hamsters.”

Rador decided that he had to get out of this conversation *now*. “A pleasure to meet you, Lord Amrothos, but I have something I must discuss with Lord Ecthelion over there.”

He bowed and walked off swiftly.

When he got to the table at which Ecthelion was seated, he stopped, loath to interrupt. Ecthelion was in the middle of explaining *something* in the tongue of Rohan, which had captivated the interest of the Rohirrim he was sitting with. Next to him, but sitting slightly back from everyone else, sat a handsome but confused-looking man of Gondor who appeared to understand nothing of what was happening.

Ecthelion gestured dramatically in a way which Rador now realised Idis had copied in a more restrained way when pretending to be him, and said something impassioned. Then he picked up a fork and waved it around. Rador was not sure what the significance of the fork was: all he could understand was Idis’s name. Then Ecthelion picked up a knife and waved that around. Again, all Rador could understand was the name Thorongil. The fork was placed facing upwards on the table, and then the knife was carefully placed on top of it, so it was resting on the fork, its blade tucked between the middle tines of the fork. The Rohirrim laughed and laughed. One silver-blond haired man was actually crying. Then Ecthelion picked up a soup spoon, and gestured at himself. The soup spoon pattered along the table, head upwards, until it came to the knife and fork. Meanwhile Ecthelion took the knife and wiggled it back and forth between the tines of the fork, and the Riders exploded with laughter again. The soup spoon came closer, right next to the fork and knife, and jumped up in the air. The knife was taken swiftly off the fork, and lay on its back on the table. The

fork leapt upright and started to hit the head of the spoon repeatedly with its tines. The silver-blond haired man was now choking.

The confused look evaporated from the face of the other man sitting next to Ecthelion. He moved his chair forward, and said, "O! Now I know what you are showing them, Ecthelion! But, where am I?" He leaned over and got a salt shaker. "I shall be the salt, comforting the knife over here, who thinks he is going to be hanged; then we both seek to ensure that the fork does not murder the spoon—"

Ecthelion stopped and spoke in Westron. "No, you cannot be the salt shaker, Beren. Mummy is the salt shaker, Daddy is the pepper!" He removed them to further up the table.

The silver-blond man said, in accented Westron, "Should not Éowyn be the pepper? I think that would suit her better," and all the Rohirrim laughed warily and glanced up at the main table, where Lady Éowyn was speaking enthusiastically to the groom's father.

Beren looked grave, and picked up another condiment container. "I am the third condiment, then."

He made the third condiment container pitter along to the knife and said in a jolly voice, "Would you still like to go fishing, then? No? What if you put on some clothing?"

At this the Rohirrim became hysterical again: clearly they understood enough Westron to know what he had said.

Rador was not the only one to have noticed this display. The bridesmaid got up and marched down off the dais. Then she picked up a spoon which had been in the salad, and clonked Ecthelion soundly over the head with it, so that it made a sonorous *dong*.

"Ecthelion!" she hissed. "Stop that *right* now. I know exactly what you are showing them, and it is *not nice*. I will tell Idis on you: luckily she has not noticed."

"Morwen, you are no fun," said Ecthelion mournfully.

"We saw the best parts anyway," said the silver-blond haired man, still laughing, and Morwen gave him a glare. Then she marched off, but pointed at her own eyes and then Ecthelion, twice over. It seemed that she was watching him.

Ecthelion slumped in his chair and then saw Rador watching him, and perked up. "Hullo? Who are you?"

Rador came up and bowed. "Hullo. I am Captain Rador, of the Minas Tirith City Guard, and I used to employ Idis as my research assistant. I was wondering if you would be interested in taking on some of her duties?"

"He is not that good at research," said Beren. "I am quite good, as long as it is about maps or battles."

"How are you at pretending to be other people in order to catch criminals?" said Rador.

Both Ecthelion and Beren sat up and looked at each other. "I would be *excellent*," said Ecthelion. He looked up at his sister sitting on the dais. "Do not tell me Idis pretended to be other people?"

"Many other people, male and female: Rohirrim, Haradrim, washerwomen—do you object to dressing up as a woman?"

Ecthelion smiled. "Not at all! I have not tried it before! This sounds rather fun!"

Beren said, "Can I join, can I join?"

Ecthelion looked at him and shook his head. "Remember how terrible you were at being a Haradrim when we were involved in covert operations in the Army, Beren? I had to keep passing you off as the village idiot."

Beren pouted. "That is not fair, Ecthelion."

"You can do my makeup," said Ecthelion. "Just think: you will probably be quite skilled because of your experience with painting those little models."

Rador bowed and said, "Well, if you are interested, do you want to audition for a role when you are next in Minas Tirith? My office is in the West corner of the seventh floor."

Ecthelion beamed. "Thank you for asking me."

Beren picked up the condiment container and waggled it. "I am still a sad little condiment container. I want to dress up too!"

"Very well, you can dress up too," said Ecthelion, rolling his eyes.

Rador made his way back to his wife. Barthon was unwontedly silent. Eventually he said, "I am never going to accuse Idis of being insane again. Those were the two most *insane* conversations I have ever had in my life, by a long margin!"

"Well, yes, they were *rather* unusual," said Rador. "Particularly the conversation about hamster decomposition—"

"Was Lord Ecthelion re-enacting—what I think?" said Barthon.

"I am not going to ask," said Rador. "I am just glad Lady Morwen stopped it. I did not want to hear any more pearls of wisdom from the third condiment pot."

Barthon started to laugh. "You do not think really he asked whether the knife still wanted to go fishing once he got his clothing back on, do you?"

"I would not wager against it," said Rador.

"What nonsense are you talking?" said Talvel.

"Never mind," said Rador. "I shall tell you later."

"I am starting to think Idis's depiction of Ecthelion was rather restrained, when I used to accuse her of being somewhat exaggerated," said Barthon.

The Steward sauntered over. "Hullo Captain, hullo Lieutenant, hullo my Lady. I hope you are enjoying the wedding?"

"The food is exceptional," said Talvel. "Where did you get greens at this time of year?"

"Éowyn has a greenhouse," said the Steward. "She is currently singing its praises to Thorongil's father. I suspect he will be offered a tour of the greenhouse tomorrow. They have found much in common: an interest in livestock and growing things."

Rador looked at Thor's mother, who was wearing a rather extraordinary green hat with four Haradric peacock feathers. She was talking with some animation to one of the Steward's daughter-in-laws, and the peacock feathers were bobbing with her head. "Thorongil's mother seems to be enjoying herself immensely."

"Aye, she is very happy," said the Steward, smiling gently. "It is a pleasure to see. I think she was as worried for her son as we were for Idis."

"Worried?" said Barthon.

The Steward turned to Barthon. "Aye. Before Idis started working with you and the Captain she was most unhappy: she felt she was not useful." He turned back to Rador. "So I must thank you both for looking after her for all those years—it made an immense difference to her. Have you found anyone to replace her?"

"We did ask Ecthelion—"

The Steward's eyebrows went up. "Really? I do not know if that is who I would suggest—"

"It is too late now: we have offered him an audition," said Rador, regretting he had not spoken to the Steward beforehand.

The Steward's lips twitched. "Let me know how that goes. In any case, I must keep circulating." He wandered off to the next table.

"What do you think he is hinting at?" said Barthon.

"I hate to think," said Rador. Then he smiled at Barthon. "O, look, it's our favourite judge!"

Barthon looked: Thor's brother Judge Denethor was striding past their table.

"Ho, Judge Denethor," said Rador.

Denethor stopped and blinked at Rador. "Captain Rador? I did not realise you knew Thorongil?"

"Nay, we are here because we know Idis," said Rador. "She did occasional research for us."

The Judge blinked again. "She *did*? Of what nature?"

"Extremely varied," said Rador. "Anything from translating for a Haradric suspect to researching the impact of various poisons on the body."

Denethor looked around. Idis and Thor had come down from their table, and were in deep conversation with King Elessar and Queen Arwen. "I can imagine she might be a bit difficult to command, Captain?"

"I never had any trouble," lied Rador, which caused his wife to choke; he had to pat her on the back.

"I was right to decide as I did in that gem smuggling case," announced Denethor, in a firm manner, apropos of nothing.

"They got away with it!" said Rador. "By the time we came back to you a second time they had hidden all the gems elsewhere."

"It is not my fault if the evidence you brought was insufficient the first time," said Denethor, raising an eyebrow.

"It was sufficient," said Rador. "Any fool could see what was going on—" He paused as his wife put her hand on his arm and pinched it rather hard.

"So, you must be happy for Thor and Idis?" she said. "You're Thor's brother?"

Denethor put his hands behind his back and intoned, "I am Thorongil's half-brother. And I am most glad that this day has come and gone, and we can all move on—"

Barthon's eyes sparkled with mischief. "It came and went rather quickly, I thought. I was not expecting them to marry until the summer."

"Ah. Er. It seems, er, that Idis was determined to go with Thorongil on this rotation to Harad, and she, ah, simply could not wait," said Denethor.

"Ah ha!" said Rador. "That was the piece of information I was missing: he is going to Harad. She did not tell me that: she just turned up in my office and announced that she hoped I was free in mid-winter because she was getting married."

"She did not pull daggers on you while announcing it?" said Denethor.

Rador had an unexpected moment of fellow feeling with Denethor. "No, not in this particular instance. She has not done that to you too?"

"Aye, she was attempting to reassure Mama that she need not worry about assassins killing Thorongil—"

Barthon guffawed. "She did not take out a piece of canvas and stab it to show you how the daggers worked, did she?"

"No," said the judge. "Thankfully. Thorongil folded the daggers up and made her put them away, without batting an eyelid. I believe that he has now instituted a ban on daggers being taken at the dinner table unless there is a life in danger."

"Your brother is a calm and sensible man, it seems," said Rador.

Denethor looked up at his brother again, who had now moved to the Elves' table. "No, not particularly. He worries all the time, but the things about which he worries are somewhat different to other people." He sighed. "I deem he thinks on a different, higher plane. He is very clever, you know, for all that he pretends not to be. I still rather wish he had tried law rather than diplomacy—"

Rador sensed that Denethor was actually strangely proud of his younger brother. He said, "Idis calls Thor 'disarming', which seems appropriate in the light of what we have been discussing. We think he will be a very good diplomat."

Denethor beamed. "What a nice description! In any case, I must go speak to the Chief Justice, but I am sure that I will see you again, Captain Rador. Farewell all!" He moved off, looking pugnacious.

"Don't pick fights about those wretched gemstones," said Talvel. "I had to hear about that for *weeks!*"

"He started it!" said Rador. "But you are right: I did not have to continue it."

"I always have the greatest difficulty in seeing much resemblance between Thorongil and his brother, unless they look surprised," said Romdaer, tactfully. "Then they look very similar."

His wife said, "Who was that man a brother to, Romdaer?"

"To the groom, dear—the red-headed man talking to the Elves over there. He is my colleague."

His wife said vaguely, "The Elves are very fair, are they not?"

This was an accurate observation, but Rador did not feel he had much to add to it. He looked at the diplomats on the other side of the table. They were watching the Rohirrim. "See, the more sober blond bearded fellow sitting next to the silver haired one? It is *his* daughter Duinion likes," said one of the men.

"What are his chances of wooing her?" said one of the other men.

"At the moment, extremely low. Lady Eadgyth despises him."

"Well at least he has someone to fail to woo. It is not like I have much of a chance in Mordor—"

A third man patted his shoulder. "Poor old Aphador. At least they will get you a new office soon?"

Then Thor and Idis came to their table. "Hullo, everyone," said Thor.

"I hope you are all having a nice time," said Idis anxiously. Then she looked around. "Where is Nefreon?"

"He found your father's cousin, Lord Amrothos. They are discussing the decomposition of hamsters, and Nefreon is having the happiest time of his life."

Idis beamed. "That is *excellent!*"

"The food is lovely, dear," said Talvel. "Really delicious."

Idis's eyes lit up. "Thank you, Lady Talvel! Wait until you have dessert! They are serving my favourite, frozen cheesecake."

"What is frozen cheese cake?" said one of the diplomats.

"It is sweet frozen cheese on a crushed biscuit base, with some preserved berries in syrup on top," said Idis. "There will also be milk ice, and frozen custard, and Haradric Delight—it is a jelly made with rose water, if you have not had it?"

Romdaer sighed. "O, Haradric Delight." He turned to his wife. "The one I always get you, dear, rolled in crushed pistachios?"

Lalaith sat up. "The pink one! I love the pink one, darling Romdaer!"

Idis smiled down at her. "I very much hope you enjoy it."

"You are very tall," Lalaith said to her, in serious tones. "How did you get so tall?"

"If you look at my father and mother, you will see," said Idis. "My parents are very tall, and therefore all my brothers and sisters are tall apart from Morwen, my bridesmaid, who is not short *exactly*—"

"I would say she is average," said Thor. "She is not short, except that she happens to belong to a family of giants."

"Where are you going on honeymoon, Thor?" said one of the diplomats.

"Dol Amroth," said Thor. "Just for a few weeks."

"I shall make you eat octopus!" said Idis.

"I am not concerned in the least by the thought of eating octopus, dear Idis," said Thor mildly, smiling at her. "But do they have crispy fried beetles with chilli in Dol Amroth? I had to eat that in Khand, as well as bull's testicles."

Rador choked. "Bull's testicles?"

"They call them 'mountain oysters'," said Thor. "I did not dislike them as much as I disliked raw sea urchin in Southern Harad. But in each occasion, I just had to swallow as quickly as I could, and then drink something to wash it down—"

"Now I am not feeling so regretful about working in Mordor," said the hapless diplomat who was getting a new office. "I do not have to eat those things, at least. I just have to deal with The Dennis—"

"I should qualify Thorongil's statement: the food in our Embassy is not like that," said Romdaer. "The Ambassador cannot take spices."

"It is bland," agreed Thor.

Idis looked puzzled. "But spices are the best part of Haradric food?"

"I must agree," said Rador. "It is why I like kebabs so much—"

"Anyway, we should speak to the other guests, but we are so grateful that you could come at short notice," said Thor. "Thank you all very much for coming."

"Would not have missed it for anything," said one of the diplomats, grinning.

"Do not forget to have the cheesecake!" called Idis, as they walked off to the next table: from the accents that table was populated by several local families. Idis patted of several children on the head.

Rador watched as the desserts were brought out, and said, "I think I am going to have to try the cheesecake. And the Haradric Precious or whatever it is?"

"Haradric Delight," said Romdaer. "Although Thorongil tells me that in Khand, they call it Khandian Delight—they claim that they came up with it first—"

Rador got up to explore the dessert table, but he had to stop as an extremely large, shaggy grey creature of some description suddenly loped across the room and made a beeline for the dessert table.

Idis's brother Cirion leapt up. "Fang! Bad boy! You are not allowed sweets!" He bounded across the room and caught the creature by the collar, and it gave him a shame-faced look.

Rador blinked at the creature as Cirion dragged it back. "What ... exactly ... is ... that?"

"He is a hound of some description," said Cirion. He patted the dog. "And you are mostly a very good boy, except when there is cheese on offer."

The huge dog gave him a mournful look and opened its huge maw: drool was dripping from it.

Thorongil's mother rushed up to the creature and scruffed its ears fondly. It stood well above her waist: she was not a tall woman. "Who's a hungry boy then? Who's a hungry boy? Mama shall give you a treat!"

"Do not believe him if he says he is hungry, Lady Almarian," said Cirion.

Another man came up. "Have you ever bred him? Do you think he would be good with sheep?"

Rador stepped politely around them: the dog gave him a second mournful look, but everyone else ignored him. He fetched some berry cheesecake, frozen custard and pale pink Haradric delight. To his interest, there were crystallised violets on the custard. Rador took his plate back to the table, and prodded the violets. They appeared to be real.

"So what was that shaggy *thing*?" said Barthor.

"Purportedly a dog," said Rador.

The diplomats stared at it. "Looks like half a warg to me," said the man from the Mordor office, with the kind of certainty of a man who had seen real wargs. "Incidentally are those violets real?"

"I think so," said Rador, and bit into it. "Yes. Sugared." He tried the cheesecake next, and had to agree with Idis: it was a delicious combination of sweet and tangy; and soft and crunchy. Then he ate the rest of the custard, and finally ate the Haradric Delight.

Several people shouted, apparently in good humour, and Rador looked over. Thor and Idis were talking to the Rohan table. He hoped nothing about knives and forks was being discussed. The silver-blond haired man leaped up and took hold of Thor's arm. If Rador was any judge, Idis was in fact bearing her daggers, and from the posture of her arms, she looked to be a hair's breadth from drawing them.

"O no, it's Deorthric," said one of the diplomats. Then he snorted. "He's threatening to hold Thor down and tattoo him—!"

"Tattoo?" said Talvel. "You mean—permanently draw on him?" Several more Riders were now gathered around Thor, all speaking enthusiastically in their own tongue.

"Aye, that is what the Riders do," said the man. Then he laughed. "There is only one thing that can stop Deorthric—here we go—"

Lady Éowyn strode up, and all the men sat immediately, apart from Deorthric. She glared at Deorthric and spoke sharply to him, and he nodded, then said something to Thor. Thor shrugged and laughed, and patted Deorthric on the shoulder. Deorthric said something back laughingly, and sat back down too. Éowyn glared at Deorthric, kissed Idis and Thor, then strode off again.

"It calms them down every time," said another man. "All you have to do if they fight is to threaten to tell the Lady, and suddenly they are like big ashamed boys: 'Don't tell her, don't tell her'."

"That would not work so well with her brother, though?" said Barthon. "I speak as an older brother with a younger sister—"

"No, it does not work with him," said the first man. "But he is not hot-headed like that anyway, so there is no need. He is a very good King for them. Sometimes he also threatens them with his sister when they are silly, or even worse, the Steward."

"The Steward?" said Barthon.

"Aye, they are terrified by the Steward because he lost his temper with them once in a battle in Umbar or Rhun—" said the second man.

"I cannot really imagine that," said Talvel. "It must take *a lot* for him to lose his temper?"

"I hate to think what they did," said the man from the Embassy to Mordor.

Finally the bride and groom had made their way around the whole room, and the dessert was finished. Thor and Idis stood in the middle of the room, holding hands, and kissed each of their parents and parents-in-law, as well as their siblings. Thor looked slightly apprehensive.

Then Thor's groomsman, the Riders, Idis's brothers and sisters, and several random nephews and nieces surrounded them and escorted them out of the room, to much cheering. The giant dog trotted after, looking thoughtful. To Rador's interest, the Steward, the King and the Queen were all

cheering and laughing, as were several other tables. Thorongil's family looked surprised, other than Denethor, who looked thoroughly disapproving.

Barthon blinked. "What? What was *that*?"

"Old custom of Rohan," said the first man who had told them about the tattoos. "They escort the bride and groom off to bed and leave them there, after singing a song of ... encouragement ..."

"By the Valar," said Rador. "No wonder poor Thorongil looked a little apprehensive." He noted then that Ecthelion had not risen to escort his sister out. He knew that Idis and her next youngest brother did not always get along, and that there had been some conflict between them about the match. To his interest, the Lord Steward went to his sixth child and said something brief, shaking his head.

All the others came back, laughing and clapping, and the silver-blond haired Rohirrim shouted something in his tongue and tossed something towards their table.

Barthon caught the thing before it went into their wine glasses and smashed them. "What is this?" he said, as all the Rohirrim gave as massive cheer.

"You are next to get married!" said one of the Riders. "He is good luck! Congratulations!" Various Riders slapped Barthon on the back, who looked somewhat worried.

Eventually, once the Riders had gone, Barthon had a chance to inspect the thing he had caught. It was a wicker model of a horse.

"Stallion. That is most definitely a stallion," said Talvel, with wide eyes.

"It is rather indecent," agreed Rador. "What is one to do with it?"

"You keep it until your own wedding, and then toss it into the crowd," said one of the Rohan diplomats, looking heartily amused.

Barthon blushed and said, "I need to put it away before small children see it," and put it underneath his chair.

"A most interesting cultural experience, this wedding, in ever so many ways," said Talvel.

Postscript

Rador had almost forgotten about his invitation to Lord Ecthelion to audition for a role as a covert officer, when Barthor came running into his room. "Captain, Captain, you have to come—it is quite horrible!" he hissed in an undertone.

"What is it?" said Rador, getting up from behind his desk.

He went out into the corridor, and then gaped. There was indeed a truly horrendous old woman out in the corridor, dressed in a bright pink dress that was much too short and small for her. She had on extremely heavy makeup and a large hat.

"Hullo, my little squirrels!" said the woman in a very bad falsetto voice to Rador and Barthor—and then Rador took note of her prominent Adam's apple and broad shoulders.

"Hullo Lord Ecthelion," he said.

The woman slumped. "You were not supposed to recognise me." She batted her heavily kohl-outlined eyes and puckered her painted lips. "Am I not beautiful?"

"Indescribable," said Rador. "But the point of disguise is to be unremarkable, you see."

"I am unremarkable," said another person from behind Ecthelion. "If I was at the Battle of Dagorlad I would blend in entirely with the troops from that time."

Rador blinked. It was Ecthelion's housemate, Beren, dressed in full antique armour. "That is not really what I had in mind, either—unless we needed you to infiltrate the soldiers at the Battle of Dagorlad, I suppose? However, you have done a very nice job with it."

"I did tell you that your outfit was silly, Beren," said the horrid old woman, dropping her falsetto voice.

"Well your dress is too short for you," said Beren. "Is it one of Morwen's old ones? I expect that is the problem."

"Idis's and Daerien's dresses were *boring*," said the horrid old woman. "If I was a woman, I would wear much more exciting things."

"Boring is actually good in this job," said Rador.

The horrid old woman sighed. "Well then, I do not think this is so fun after all. Also it was an awful lot of work getting dressed in this. I do not see how Mistress Rose does it so quickly."

"I did a good job with the makeup, did I not?" said Beren. "I really accentuated his eyes and mouth."

"Excellent work," said Rador, tactfully, wondering who Mistress Rose was, and deciding not to enquire. "Thank you both so much for taking the effort, and I will let you know if there are any covert operations which call for either soldiers of the Battle of Dagorlad, or extraordinary old women dressed in pink dresses."

He and Barthon watched as Ecthelion and Beren minced and clanked off, respectively. When he was sure that they must have gone, he sat down in the corridor and laughed. Barthon soon joined him, and they were rolling on the floor, crying with laughter. Whenever one of them stopped the other would start.

Eventually Barthon said, in between spurts of laughter, "I suppose that is a no, then?"

"Most definitely," said Rador. "I do not feel that subtlety is Lord Ecthelion's strong point."

Post-postscript

The Steward looked seriously at Rador, Barthon and the three new young operatives Rador had employed. "We think there is a covert smuggling operation in the drain system. Unfortunately someone lost the maps—and we will need someone to assist you in mapping the system—"

He stopped and smiled at Rador, and Rador had a very unpleasant feeling.

The door to the Steward's office opened. "Hullo!" said Beren. "I gather you chaps have a drain system which needs mapping!"

The Steward smiled again. "I believe you met Beren at Idis's wedding? He is Gondor's finest cartographer."

Beren blushed. "You are too kind, Lord Steward." Then he turned to Rador. "I am all prepared! I have fetched boots and a waterproof canvas jacket! When do we start?"

Rador sighed. "Let us get prepared first, Lord Beren. We will send for you when we are ready."

"Have fun," said the Steward, a smile twitching at the sides of his mouth despite his best efforts, and Rador gave him a glare. The Steward simply winked back.