

# Idis in Harad

A Middle Earth spy story

As they rode up, Idis enjoyed watching Beyazim, the capital city of Harad, getting closer and closer, rising out the dusty steppe: a huge glittering mountain of white stone, domes and towers, going up to a peak. It reminded her somewhat of Minas Tirith, but it was also strangely foreign: the shapes were different.

"Surely there was no mountain here before," she said to her husband. "It is not like Minas Tirith, built on Mount Mindolluin?"

"I think there was a small rocky outcropping?" said Thorongil, shading his eyes.

"Aye, but they added more to it, Lady Idis," said the Deputy Ambassador, Lord Arahaelon, turning on his horse stiffly.

They got closer and Arahaelon said, "Keep your head down and make sure you keep your hair covered, Lady Idis. Let me handle this."

"I hear you, Deputy Ambassador," she said. She sensed that Arahaelon did not approve of her, and she was unsure why. She wondered if he was worried that she was going to use her social rank to overrule him. Her father had told her that Arahaelon was to be their intelligence contact while in Harad, which made things even more awkward. Idis wondered how to reassure him: usually she watched and read a good deal before she acted, to the extent that she sometimes was paralysed from taking any action at all. She hoped that she would be able to work with him. She was not used to working in a team; she was a cat who walked by her lone.

Then she looked over at her husband again, and realised that this was no longer the case. Sometimes she could not believe that she was married: her heart still turned over in her chest at the thought.

She was very anxious about her new position in the Embassy. First, she was worried that their colleagues would think she had gotten her position as a favour to her father. She had asked Arahaelon and Romdaer to tell the Ambassador not to tell anyone who her parents were until she had settled in a little. Secondly, she and Thor were both very concerned not to make people uncomfortable with their relationship. She had never heard of a husband and wife team working in the bureaucracy before. Thirdly, she was just generally worried about the prospect of having to communicate with other people. She wished, not for the first time, that she had gotten just a little of her brother Cirion's ease in dealing with people.

As they got to the gate, guards bearing spears wearing armour with overlapping bronze plates held out their spears. "State your business!" said one.

Arahaelon dismounted and took papers out. "We are diplomatic envoys from Gondor, headed to the Embassy in Beyazim."

One of the guards read the papers, and raised an eyebrow, staring at Idis. "There in an envoy who is a woman?"

"Yes," said Arahaelon, and indicated Idis, who looked down at the pommel of her horse's saddle. "This is Lady Idis, our new Cultural Attaché. She will look at weaving patterns."

The other guard frowned and stared at Idis's sword. "This seems very strange."

Arahaelon frowned. "Alas, it was not my decision. The Grand Vizier of Gondor commanded it."

The first guard laughed. "When the mighty command, we must bend like reeds in the wind, Lord Arahaelon."

"Truly," said Arahaelon, and they were waved in.

Idis blinked: she was almost overwhelmed by the noise and smell of rubbish, unfamiliar spices, and sweaty animals and people. The roads were crammed with people and animals of all kinds: vendors, almost naked street urchins, beggars, veiled women, people on donkeys, slaves bearing palanquins, dogs, chickens, an old man pushing a barrow with melons, an old woman selling some kind of milk drink, soldiers with strange bronze helmets and curved swords.

"Our Embassy is further up the hill," said Arahaelon. "It is an enclosed compound."

By the time they got there, Idis felt hot and a little sick. She waved the ever-present flies away from her face and noticed that some local people were carrying fans made out of leaves, and wondered if she could procure one.

They dismounted, passed the sweating guards clad in armour of Gondor, and servants ran to take their horses. As they entered the compound, the babble from outside quieted suddenly and the air felt cooler. The compound was arranged around a courtyard which held a fountain and several palm trees, with cloistered, shaded corridors around the edge leading to various rooms. Old men wearing only loincloths and bearing palm leaf brushes were cleaning down the area about the fountain, apparently heedless of the heat.

Standing at the edge of the courtyard was an older portly man of Gondor with greying hair, and a young, slender pretty woman of Gondor, dressed entirely in silk.

"Deputy Ambassador Arahaelon!" said the man. "Welcome! We did not expect to see you again so soon: we thought you were due for a sabbatical."

Arahaelon passed his hand over his face. "Ambassador Galador, certain events at home required my return, of which I will tell you fully shortly." Then he formally greeted the Ambassador, and kissed the hand of the woman.

The Ambassador passed his eyes over the group. "I can see you are full of news, Arahaelon."

As you can see from the letter I sent from Umbar, I bring with me Lord Romdaer, Lord Thorongil and, ah, and Lord Thorongil's wife, Lady Idis, who will be our new Cultural Attaché—"

The Ambassador kissed Idis's hand. "Greetings, Lord Romdaer, hullo Thor, nice to see you again. Greetings, Lady Idis." Then his brow creased. "I still do not really understand what happened to Gadrion? You said he *died*?"

The Ambassador's wife said in a sweet voice, "Greetings, Lord Romdaer! Greetings Lady Idis, what a pleasure to welcome another woman to the compound! I do hope you will enjoy it here. I am Lady Nidhien." She ignored Thor, who did not seem to be offended or concerned by this, but Idis was inclined to judge her harshly for it.

Local people bustled up and took their luggage. "No!" said Arahaelon, to one in Haradric. "I have swapped chambers with Lord Thorongil and Lady Idis. I will take Gadrion's old chambers, and they will take mine."

Idis's two maids were taken off to another room to be settled, while a servant guided them to the room: a large whitewashed room with high ceilings and windows with intricate carven screens in a geometric pattern. Silken hangings on the wall depicted strange animals: Idis was unsure whether the animals were real or imaginary.

Thor sat on a carven silk-covered sofa with a sigh, and began to pull off his boots and threw his sword in the corner. "I hope you are not too tired."

"I am very hot," said Idis, and sat down more decorously on a chair and removed her sword and leather riding boots. "I do not think anyone here is very happy to see me."

Thor shrugged. "Do not worry about Arahaelon, my love, he does not like anyone."

"He is fond of you in a grumpy way." Idis removed her jacket and riding breeches, and stripped down to her camisole. She felt sweaty, hot and nauseous.

Thor snorted, and took off his jacket and put it neatly over the back of a chair, and undid his shirt.

They washed their faces in the water provided in jugs in the toilet room next door, then pushed back the gauze covering and lay down on the large bed, too tired and hot to do more than stare at the ceiling. Idis watched a large bumbling fly hit at the top of the gauze, seeking an escape, and then started to fall asleep.

There was a knock at the door, and Thor leaped up off the bed and opened the door a crack. From the voice outside, it was evidently Arahaelon.

"We need to be ready to brief—" Arahaelon started in businesslike tones.

"We are just getting dressed," said Thor. "If you would not mind giving us a little time?"

"Many apologies. I forgot your wife was there." Arahaelon's footsteps retreated down the corridor.

Idis said, "That was awkward, and it is not even as if we were doing anything fun."

"We can revisit the idea of fun things tonight when we are less hot and tired—?" Thor was still so sweetly shy about approaching her.

Idis smiled. "I will keep you to that."

Then they rummaged around in their bags to get appropriate clothing. Idis passed over the formal Haradric outfit her Aunt Nilofar had given her as a wedding present, and put on a simple brown silk split skirt and matching jacket. Her husband looked smart in his new suit. She kissed him, and then

they went out into the courtyard. The bright light instantly made her head ache, and she was glad of the covered cloisters.

Thor knocked on a room, and Arahaelon came out, and nodded to them both. He said to Thor, as if there had been no interruption, "We need to be ready to brief the Ambassador on Gadrion. I have, of course, already written to him about it. I expect you to help me explain what happened—"

Thor looked at her and said, "Idis was there for much of it too." Idis felt a sudden burst of love for her husband and his determination to ensure she was recognised.

Thor led Idis to a large sitting area with a table. The Ambassador sat at the head of the table, and his wife sat beside him. Other than the Ambassador's wife, every other person at the table was male, and they stared as Idis came in. The table was laid with *café* and Haradric food on platters.

Idis followed her husband's lead and sat beside him. She folded her hands and looked down: she could look small and demure if needed. Her brother Húrin had a theory people had often mistaken her quietness for gentleness, and that this was why she had received marriage proposals in her early twenties, which later were swiftly withdrawn when prospective suitors met her.

They all stood and looked to Westernesse, which surprised Idis; it was an old-fashioned custom. The only person she knew who still did it was her father, but if he was not around, no one else in the family bothered. Her mother had given another brother, Ecthelion, a lecture when he had tried to rebel against it aged sixteen: "It is important to your father. In your own house when you are grown, you may do differently, but while you live here with him, please respect his traditions."

"Well," said the Ambassador, "Welcome back to Harad, everyone! We have one new face, Lady Idis, our new Cultural Attaché, but the rest of you know each other. Please, eat!"

After everyone had taken some food, the men glanced at each other, and the man who sat opposite her leaned across the table. "Greetings, my Lady. I was wondering, what does a Cultural Attaché actually *do*?"

Idis said, "I will look at the art and culture of Harad, assist in repatriating any cultural artefacts of Gondor Harad took in the War of the Ring, and create a list of weaving patterns."

Just as the man's expression became slightly sneering, she said in Haradric, "You may also be interested to know that I will be talking with the Empress Mother. We are to meet in two weeks." She did not bother giving the man an honorific; she did not feel he had earned it.

For a moment there was silence. The man blinked and looked confused. Idis realised that he had had difficulty in following what she was saying because she had used women's language. She had expected others to have Thor's fluency.

Meanwhile her husband leaned forward, a very slight smile on his face, "Yes, Idis really did say she is meeting the Empress Mother in two weeks, Bergon."

"But how—?" said Bergon.

"She has a connection to the Emperor's family by marriage." To her interest, Romdaer was visibly pleased at Bergon's discomfort: Idis suspected he disliked the man too.

One of the other men said thoughtfully, "You have a very strong Northern Haradric accent."

"I have been told that before." Idis bit into a pink coloured ball of confectionary. She had been taught by her Aunt Nilofar and a Northern Haradric refugee who lived in Eryn Arnem, from whom she had acquired the accent. The pink ball was very sweet and rather horrible, so she took a sip of *café* to wash it down.

"It is interesting that you speak Haradric," said Nidhien to Idis. "I have also picked up a little while I am here."

"Of course." Idis kept her face still as the woman demonstrated her fluency in various commands to servants. "Most impressive."

"What I don't really understand," said the Ambassador, "is how our Thorongil went from a bachelor to a married man within such a short space of time?"

"Idis and I met in the Archives," said Thor, shyly, blushing. "Then I suppose one thing followed another—"

Arahaelon rolled his eyes. "I have not received a satisfactory explanation, Ambassador."

"It is difficult to explain," said Romdaer, defensively. "It involved Khandian assassins in Minas Tirith, among other things, as we have tried to relate."

"The trick to working out what was happening," said Thor, "was that the Khandians think we are the barbarians."

"That is outrageous of them!" said Bergon. "The Khandians poison each other regularly, are utterly insane, and still think Sauron is going to rise again."

"They are most definitely barbaric," agreed Nidhien. "And quite stupid."

Idis shrugged. "Their ways are different to those of Gondor, but they are still both intelligent and dangerous. Some people also think the Rohirrim are barbaric."

Thor smiled at her. "In relation to the latter, there may *occasionally* be reasons for that?"

Idis knew that he was thinking of the behaviour of the Rohirrim at both their own and her sister Morwen's wedding. They had become a little wild with excitement, and had threatened to carry Thor off and tattoo him against his will.

Bergon sighed. "The Rohan office would be such fun!"

The other two men looked at each other, laughed, and chorused, "We could be in the Mordor office."

Thor said to Idis, "These two are Nallon and Baradir. And comparing ourselves to Mordor is how we ensure that we do not feel sorry for ourselves in the heat—"

"The soot and grit gets into everything in Mordor," said one of the laughing men. "Aphador and Huron say it takes weeks to wash off."

The conversation veered off into topics upon which Idis had not much to say; her husband did not say much either.

Idis glanced at Nidhien. Nidhien stretched a smile over her face. “That is an *interesting* dress you are wearing, Lady Idis, of an unusual design. It is made of Haradric silk, is it not?”

Idis did not think the word ‘interesting’ was meant as a compliment. “I find it is convenient to have my everyday clothing made with split skirts so that I can ride and fight if necessary.”

The table went silent, and Idis reflected that this was why she did not like talking to other people very much. She was unsure what she had said to cause this silence. She often found men easier to talk to than women.

Bergon said, “So you *were* wearing a sword earlier? I thought you were—”

“Of course. We all bore swords, in case we faced any brigands,” said Idis.

“Do you practice women’s fencing?” said Nidhien. “I hear some women in Minas Tirith practice it, although I am not one of them.”

“No, I don’t fight like *that*.” Idis recalled what her mother said of women’s fencing: ‘Would I have killed the Witch King of Angmar if I had used one of those knitting needles? What a stupid idea!’

She was struck by a thought, and decided to change the topic. “Could I ask a question? Do you think I could get one of those black cloaks that some of the women here favour? The ones that show only a small part of your face?”

Nidhien stared at her and the other men gaped. “Why would you want *that*, my Lady?” said Nidhien.

“I like to look at local markets. The different products intrigue me, Lady Nidhien.”

“I thought I would never be able to drag you away from the market in Umbar,” said Thor, fondly.

“We can get our servants to get you anything you need at the market,” said Nidhien. “Or you can send your maids, with guards? That is the traditional way of Gondor, in case you are unaware of it.”

Then the Ambassador clapped and said, “Well, back to work, everyone! Arahaelon, Romdaer and Thor, I want you to brief me on what has been going on in Gondor—”

Idis noted she had not been included and was not sure what to do next. No one had shown her a desk or office. She watched the others go to their respective places, and quietly walked back to the room she shared with Thor.

In this way, she overheard Bergon talking to another man. She stopped and hid behind a pillar. “No, it is really strange, Baradir: the marriage, the woman, all of it,” said Bergon.

Baradir said, “Lady Nidhien said the Ambassador was furious about this woman coming. Her presence here is a personal favour to the Steward and the King? Who is she?”

"I have no idea," said Bergon. "I never saw anyone of that name at dances when I was younger. She does not look wholly Númenórean, and that name is not Númenórean either. Do you think she is Northern Haradric? We've been trying to talk to someone in the Imperial palace for years, and she just gets an invite to see the Empress Mother like that—?"

"Did you see the look on her face when Nidhien asked her if she did women's fencing?" said Baradir. "If looks could kill—I will wager she fights with men's swords."

"Thor might be the cover to make her presence here acceptable," said Bergon, doubtfully. "Arahaelon is not happy that he has to share his precious protégé with her, is he? Apparently he hinted strongly that it was a marriage of convenience in his letter to the Ambassador."

"I do not see why she did not pretend to marry Arahaelon?" said Baradir. "It would be convenient for both surely? Thor is an odd choice."

Bergon laughed. "I would not wish Arahaelon on any woman, not even for convenience—"

Idis waited for the two men to go, then made her way back to the room. She still did not feel very well. Her maids were waiting in the room.

"Hullo, my Lady," said Tirien. "Do you want anything?"

"I shall have a sleep," said Idis. "I hope you are quite settled?"

"Lady Nidhien's maids do not like us," said Feriadis.

Idis laughed. "Lady Nidhien does not like me either, I suspect, and I am minded not to like her, although I'll reserve my judgement. Keep me informed, and let me know if I need to intervene to protect you."

"We will leave you to sleep, then," said Tirien. "For the moment we can take care of ourselves."

As she lay and watched the light play on the carved window covers, Idis compiled her thoughts in an orderly fashion. First, Thor had been Arahaelon's protégé, and she was correct to think that Arahaelon was miffed by her presence. Secondly, the Ambassador was not happy about Idis's presence here either. Thirdly, the diplomats seemed inclined to think that Idis and Thor's marriage was a sham, for reasons she did not understand. She considered writing her thoughts down, and wondered which of Amrothos's ciphers to use and whether the Embassy was aware of them. She would have to ask Thor when he— She fell asleep before completing the thought.

Later Thor came back and woke her for dinner, and apologised that she had not been introduced properly to everyone. "I will introduce you tomorrow," he said. "The Ambassador is ..."

"Hopeless? Lazy? Lacking in diligence?" supplied Idis.

"I was trying to be diplomatic: I was going to say 'odd'." Thor laughed. "But those will do."

The next day she spoke to the local woman who cleaned her and Thor's rooms. The cleaner wished to know how Idis had such good Haradric. The fact her father's cousin had married a woman of Harad caused the cleaner to be surprised and pleased. They then had a long discussion about families (including the cleaner's numerous children) and how Idis also came from a large family.

She was allocated a desk, facing Bergon. He stared at her, and she returned the stare 'with interest', as her brother Túrin was fond of saying, until Bergon looked down at his desk. Then she settled down, and read her book on Haradric rug patterns which she had brought from Gondor, and took notes. Several of the diplomats wandered past suspiciously close, and she suspected that they were trying to look at what she was doing.

In the afternoon, Thor moved his desk around the corner from everyone else, saying that it was convenient if he was closer to Romdaer's office. He explained to Idis at bedtime that he had been quite distracted by her, and had found himself admiring her ankles rather than working on his report. Idis laughed, and offered to show him a lot more than her ankles, an offer which he gladly accepted.

On the second day, Idis dared to ask the cleaner whether she could acquire a black cloak in the style worn by some of the local women. "I will pay you for it, of course."

The cleaner looked up at her. "I shall have to ask for a very long one, memsahib. You are very tall."

Idis said, "Yes, I am."

"You had to marry a man who was shorter than you for this reason?"

Idis laughed. "No, I could have had one who was taller if I wished, but I wanted Thor."

The cleaner beamed. "A love marriage, memsahib?"

"Yes, very much so."

Then Idis read at her desk, watching how the office worked. Just before lunch, Baradir sidled up to her. He had been shouted at earlier by Bergon for being slow with something.

Idis was startled, and loosened her daggers so that they fell into her hands.

Baradir's eyes widened. "I am sorry to surprise you."

Idis tucked her daggers back up her sleeves without releasing the blades and forced herself to relax. "I am sorry; I was thinking of something else. Did you want something of me?"

"How are you with dialect, m'Lady? I would ask Thor, but he's back at the Ministry with Lord Romdaer today, and I got the sense that you know the language well—"

She scanned the document. "You see this lettering here?— they use a slightly different symbol for *ch*, and the sound is a little different when they speak it, but it really is the same—and then they use this word—so it comes out like *this*—" She translated the letter.

Baradir stared at her. "You are as good as Thor!"

Idis smiled. "The ultimate compliment."

Later she saw her cleaner talking in an animated fashion to the men who swept the courtyard and the other cleaners, and waved to them. They all smiled back.



That night, she said to Thor as they lay in bed, "This office does not work so well. Half of them do not know what they are doing."

"That is why Arahaelon and the Ambassador are annoyed about Gadrion's death. He spoke Haradric well and was reasonably competent." Thor shrugged, and his face shadowed in the light of the bronze lamp on their bed stand. "I am upset too; I blame myself."

"It is not thy fault that he took bribes, and then killed himself before trial." Idis sat up. "If he had succeeded in killing thee, he would be dead at my hand."

Then they made love fiercely, as if to prove that they were both very much alive.

On the third day, the cleaner leaned in and said very quietly, "The Ambassador's wife does not like you. The woman who cleans her room told me—"

Idis shrugged. "She does not have to like me. I sense that she is a very unhappy woman."

"She wants a child," said the cleaner, sweeping under the cupboard.

Idis grimaced. "O, that is hard. My aunt-by-marriage had difficulties, and my mother said it drove her a little insane until she had her sons."

"I am glad your aunt-by-marriage had sons," said the cleaner.

Meanwhile, in the office, Baradir and Nallon bickered about whether Nallon had properly filed the maps after using them last week.

Bergon stood, his face red. "Silence! I cannot take this!" He threw his book at Nallon and stormed out into the courtyard.

Nallon went to complain to the Ambassador, while Idis raised one eyebrow and looked at Baradir.

Baradir said, "Bergon was supposed to go home with us in three weeks, but he must remain behind now Gadrion is dead."

Idis wondered if Bergon blamed Thor for this, indirectly.

The Ambassador came out, smiling. "Now, I know it is very hot and very tiring here, but we must not let tempers get out of control, boys."

Baradir, Bergon and Nallon bowed and apologised. Idis watched; she refused to bow to someone who called her a boy, particularly given the fact she had not been involved in the conflict.

Later she overheard Baradir say to Nallon, "Thor's wife looked at the Ambassador like he was a beetle she wished to crush, just then. And I am sure she was ready to attack me yesterday when I startled her. I think she is a Haradric assassin in disguise."

Nallon scoffed. "Baradir, you are ridiculous. You are dreaming."

Idis had not realise her feelings towards the Ambassador were so evident on her face. She resolved to hide them better, henceforth.

On the fifth day, the cleaner brought in a long dark robe, and instructed Idis on how to garb herself. Idis gave her money for the robe. "O, no, this is too much," said the cleaner, and then they argued over it.

The cleaner said, "I am worried that you will be taken advantage of, memsahib. You need to offer a very low price at first, and the merchant will offer a high price."

"I might ask my husband for guidance at first," said Idis. "He will know the proper prices."

However, Idis's planned trip to the market did not occur. Just as the day started to heat up, Idis felt unwell, and then suddenly, she was really sick. One of her ladies ran to get Thor. He came running, and found her kneeling, vomiting over the drain on the washroom floor.

"O no, are you pregnant?" he said.

She looked up. "I do not think so. It is—well—coming out of the other end too—"

"Harad Belly," said Thor. "I have had it several times, only ever while I am here. I forgot to warn you."

Eventually it stopped, and Thor helped Idis to bed while her ladies got her cool clothes.

"I hope I am better for meeting the Empress Mother," said Idis.

Thor kissed her sweaty brow. "That is the least of my worries. I want you to try and drink this tea with a little sugar in it."

Initially she could not keep it down, but eventually, by taking very small sips, she managed to have some.

Arahaelon came in and looked at her with concern.

"I am not pregnant, if that is what you are wondering," said Idis, wearily. It was sign of how unwell she was that she could not even enjoy the shocked expression on his face.

"Harad Belly?" he said.

"Unfortunately," said Thor. "Do you need me for the meeting about pipe weed smuggling, Arahaelon? I would really prefer not to go. I want to get more tea with sugar into her."

"We can look after her, my Lord," said Tirien.

"I know, but—"

"No, stay, Thor," said Arahaelon, and turned on his heel and left.

Feriadis shook her head. "He is brusque, if you do not mind me saying, my Lord."

Thor said, "He has ever been so, but it has gotten worse. Gadrion's death really upset him—"

It took Idis three days to recover. When she finally ventured out, the other diplomats looked at her warily.

"Are you well now, my Lady?" asked Baradir.

"Yes, just a case of Harad Belly," said Idis.

Then she started to read through her rug pattern book. She was so engrossed in it that she did not notice that her husband was back until he came up to her desk.

"I had an interesting meeting this morning," said Thor. "We may have to go on a journey. I am going to get changed out of my formal gear, but I will be back, and we can talk when we eat lunch."

"No, I shall talk to you while you change," said Idis.

She walked with him back to the room they shared, while Thor explained that the two of them would probably have to talk to the head of the *café* guild at some point. "He lives in a regional port called Qarshoom."

They passed their cleaner. "That woman always smiles at me now, and she never did before," said Thor. "Is this your doing?"

"Maybe," Idis said.

Lunch was yet again very ordinary: Idis suspected that the cooks had been ordered to make food of Gondor without knowing what it was supposed to taste like. It lacked flavour and the bread had the texture of a brick.

After lunch, she knocked on Arahaelon's door, and Arahaelon said gruffly, "Enter!"

She came in and sat. "Did Father tell you that I am with the King's Intelligence Service too?"

Arahaelon scowled. "Yes—"

"I must tell you something I discovered back in Minas Tirith."

Arahaelon closed his eyes. "What, my Lady? I am not sure I can take any more."

"Do not fear, I will fix it. I have already dealt with the Gondor side of the problem."

"Just tell me," said Arahaelon, passing his hand over his face wearily. His left eyelid twitched.

"Lord Romdaer had a Haradric mistress who asks for expensive gifts," said Idis. "He has agreed to end it. Actually, I suspect he was relieved, after he got over the horror of me knowing, because he had gotten himself into rather a situation. The mistress is threatening to blackmail him."

"The Harad office is a wretched hole!" Arahaelon put his head in his hands. "The problem is that good people who speak Haradric and who are prepared to come out here are few and far between. Lord Thorongil is a rare bird."

Idis laughed. "And utterly unaware of it. I adore him." She paused as a strange look flitted across Arahaelon's face. "In any case, to return to Romdaer, I have procured a Haradric woman's robe, and I will don it so I will speak to the mistress. Romdaer is otherwise competent and decent, and I have no desire for this office to lose another good person."

"You will not kill her, will you?" said Arahaelon, glumly.

"Nay, not unless she tries to kill me. I am not an assassin. I only kill if I must."

"You are very much your father's child, Lady Idis," said Arahaelon.

Idis inclined her head. "There is a question I have: why are you not Ambassador?"

To her alarm and horror, Arahaelon's eyes watered. "Please do not ask me this."

"I am sorry, but I must know."

Arahaelon would not meet her eyes. "I am not respectable, Lady Idis."

Idis eyed him: it was necessary to pretend that she did not know what he was talking about, although she thought she knew very well what he was getting at. "What do you mean?"

"I will never marry. I ... you see ... I have no desire to."

"Not all men marry. My late Uncle Boromir did not, so I have been told. I doubt that my brother Ecthelion will marry. Is *that* what you mean?"

"This ... lack of respectability ... would have been an issue had Boromir ever become Steward." Arahaelon coloured slightly. "Or if Ecthelion was the oldest son, not Elboron."

Idis sighed. "You are right: if Ecthelion was Steward and the only son, it would be a problem. That being said, he's said that if *he* had been King Eärnur, he would have produced heirs, for the good of the realm—he *hates* being likened unto King Eärnur—we both believe that Eärnur was a fool for many reasons. But I do not see why it should be an issue for other roles where heirs are not necessary?"

Arahaelon glanced up at her. "I did not realise that you had discussed these matters with Ecthelion?"

"Thel is a good man, although we irritate each other." Idis stood. "But—I cannot help noticing that *you* are the competent one, and everyone knows it. I even noticed this back in Minas Tirith before we came to Harad. It seems unfortunate that the best man for the job is not able to take it."

When she left Arahaelon's office, she bumped into Lady Nidhien. There was an awkward moment when it became evident that Nidhien was not going to curtsy, so Idis bowed first. She did not care in the least; she was used to people not bowing or curtsying when she was in disguise.

Nidhien said sweetly, "I was *so* sad to hear that you were unwell, Lady Idis. I do hope you are better now?"

"Yes, it was a dose of Harad Belly. I am almost fully recovered, Lady Nidhien."

"I am *most* happy to hear it." Nidhien walked off.

Idis went back to her room, and clothed herself in the long black cloak in the way that the cleaner had instructed. Only a small part of her face could be seen. Today, she decided to explore the capital and get the lay of the land. Tomorrow she would meet the mistress.

There were several disadvantages to the robe: it was hot and stuffy, her peripheral vision was impaired and people kept bumping into her with carts and she had to keep jumping aside for palanquin bearers. On the other hand, no one knew she was not Haradric, and she had freedom of movement.

She walked down the hill to the market and inspected the strange fruit and vegetables. She ignored the desperate calls of the merchants and wondered what prices they would have offered her if they knew she was from Gondor. She was going to have to do some experiments. Then she went to a spice stall. The smell was amazing: pungent and rich. The piles of different colored spices in ochre, red, orange and yellow were quite beautiful.

The spice merchant said, "You won't find cardamom of this quality in Northern Harad, lady."

"How do you know I am from there?" she asked.

"Your height, your eye colour and now your accent," the merchant laughed. "First time in Beyazim?"

"Yes," she said. "I will not buy today but I may return tomorrow."

As she went back up the hill, she marked the house where Romdaer had said that the mistress lived: a pleasant little stuccoed apartment with a balcony. She slipped back into the Embassy and took off the robes and hung them over her arm.

"What are you doing, Lady Idis?" said Bergon, crossing the courtyard. "You went out in that garb, alone? Are you crazed by the sun?"

"I wanted to get a feel for Beyazim," said Idis.

"You should not go out alone, my Lady," said Baradir. "We always go out in pairs."

Idis gave him a thin smile. "I assure you, I was perfectly safe." Then she saw her husband crossing the bottom end of the courtyard and waved to him.

"Hullo!" Thor came up to her. "How was the City?"

"Noisy and dirty. I am tempted to buy some spices."

Baradir said, "You tell her, Thor, she should not really go out alone. It might be dangerous for her."

Thor said with a wry laugh, "I fear rather for the life of anyone who looks at Idis crossways."

Idis said, "Do not be silly, Thor. I would never take a life lightly."

Bergon looked at Thor. "She is not serious, is she?"

Idis blinked at Bergon and smiled. "I am happy to duel you, if you doubt me? But not to the death, only to the touch—"

"Very well—" said Bergon, drawing himself up, and Idis dropped into a sword-fighting stance.

Thor crossed his arms. "*No*, Idis. You can duel *me*, if you must fight someone."

Bergon opened his mouth to protest indignantly, and Baradir held his arm. "Thor is better than you, I deem—remember the time we sparred last year? If any of us faces the Lady, it should be him."

"Have you seen Thor fight, my Lady?" asked Bergon.

She looked at her husband. "No. On the one occasion where I might have had an opportunity to see him fight with a sword, he was drunk—"

Thor scowled. "Do not bring *that* up, Idis! I am thankful that you intervened."

"Drunk?" said Baradir. "I have *never* seen Thor drink to excess. Why was he drunk, my Lady?"

Thor blushed and looked at Idis: he had been drowning his sorrows after they had had a lover's tiff. Idis did not feel particularly proud of how she'd behaved during that tiff, so she decided not to explain. The other two men stared at them.

Nallon came up. "What is going on?"

"Thor is going to defend the pride of the men of Gondor by duelling his wife," said Baradir.

Nallon burst out laughing. "Really? This is hilarious!"

Idis narrowed her eyes at her husband. "It will have to be early, before the heat gets too much. You shall be sorry."

Thor smiled mildly at her. "Perhaps I shall be." Then he and Nallon went down to see if they could hire one of the fight arenas in the outer city.

As the rest of them went back to their desks, Bergon shook his head. "Please do not chop Thor into pieces, my Lady."

"I shall not hurt him too badly," said Idis. "He is my husband, after all."

Romdaer was passing, but stopped, raising an eyebrow. "Why, by the Valar, would you be chopping Lord Thorongil into pieces, my Lady?"

"They are having a duel tomorrow morning," said Baradir. "It started out as Idis challenging Bergon to a duel, but Thor has now stepped in to defend the honour of the men of Gondor."

Romdaer stared at Idis. She was was shocked when the reserved man laughed loudly; he had been somewhat awkward with her since the conversation about the mistress. "O my, would it be possible for me to watch, my Lady?"

"I do not see why not," said Idis. "The others are coming."

Thor and Nallon came back. "A session has been arranged at Farzad's arena," said Thor.

The next morning, Idis and Thor rose early. "You do not have to do this," said Idis.

"I cannot let down the pride of the men of Gondor," said Thor, smiling. "And I had to save Bergon: he had no idea as to what he was getting himself into, love—"

They dressed in breeches and tunics, and fetched their swords. Then Idis grabbed her black woman's garb, and Thor grabbed a long cloak, while they waited in the courtyard for the others. They had decided to have breakfast afterwards.

Arahaelon emerged into the courtyard and stared at them angrily. "What are you two doing?"

"We are going to duel at the arena," said Thor.

Arahaelon shook his head. "Has everyone gone utterly insane?" Then he sighed. "Will you wait for me to eat breakfast? I think I must see this."

It was only a short while later when Barahir, Nallon, Bergon, Romdaer and Arahaelon emerged into the courtyard. Romdaer eyed Arahaelon. "Deputy Ambassador, I am surprised to see you here?"

Arahaelon scowled. "I seem to be growing ever more foolish with old age. I do not know why I am allowing this—but I am curious—"

Thor and Idis put on the covering garb, and they set out for the fight arena. The proprietor was a short, fat man with a hennaed greying beard, gold earrings and a gold front tooth. When they arrived, Nallon paid over money and he bowed. "Thank you, sahib, thank you; you are very generous."

Idis and Thor discarded their covering garments and entered the oval arena: a sandy space with seats for audiences on the side.

"You did not tell me one of the fighters was a woman," said the man with the hennaed beard, frowning with immense disapproval. "You men of Gondor are insane!" Then he paused and added, "And the woman, too. This is improper!"

"You have promised us the use of the arena now," said Nallon.

The man with the hennaed beard grunted. "Very well. Just once."

Thor and Idis wandered around the arena and warmed up. Then Thor said, "Are you ready?"

For an answer, Idis took a fighting pose, and Nallon drew in his breath.

They bowed to each other, and began. Idis started gently, but after a short time Thor smiled. "This is less than half your ability, Idis."

Idis pouted. "Right, then." She stepped up her efforts.

Thor countered her strikes easily. "Still not—your best effort—?"

"I thought your—military career—was undistinguished?" said Idis.

"It was," said her husband, dancing away. "Entirely undistinguished—there was—not much—to do other—than read—and teach myself—Haradric and—practice swordplay. My men—bet on me—in duels—"

Idis grunted, and tried a strike her mother had taught her. "Dirty Rohirric move," said Thor, grinning, and blocking it.

After that there was no time for talking. Idis almost forgot she was fighting her husband and became obsessed with getting first blood. They danced back and forth across the arena, then Thor caught her blade.

"You are—stronger—than me," she said, gritting her teeth.

Thor laughed. "And you have—better reach—and you are—taller."

They fell silent again as they concentrated. Idis thought she had finally cornered her husband, but then he blocked her strike again, and touched her side with the sword.

"First blood," he said, panting. They stared at each other. Idis was having difficulty controlling conflicting emotions. Some part of her wanted to wrestle her husband to the ground and swyve him right then and there; another part of her wanted to hit him.

Instead she dropped her sword point. "You win that round." Then she turned on the others standing at the edge of the arena, her eyes blazing. "Did you know this about my husband?"

The men from the Embassy were staring. "No," said Bergon. "He has beaten us, but we did not—"

"No, we never tested him like that," said Baradir, faintly.

"You still have more time," said the henna-bearded man in accented Westron. Then he turned to the others and said, "Wait, these two are married? That is less improper—"

Idis did not catch the answer, because she and Thor went to the barrels of water and splashed themselves and caught their breath.

Then they went back to the arena. "Best of three?" said Idis, narrowing her eyes.

"Absolutely," said Thor, and they bowed to each other.

In the second round, Idis was far more prepared for her husband's skill. She said, "Why did you—not fight like this—when the assassins—attacked?"

"Because I was—poisoned—and—in pain," said her husband. "You know—that."

"I suppose," Idis said, dancing back and blocking one of his blows, "that you were—too drunk—to fight anyway."



“True,” said Thor. “I was—drowning my—sorrows.”

“I am sorry—I made you sad. That is—why I had—to save your life.” She caught him with a blow on the leg. “Drown your—sorrows now!” she crowed. “First blood.”

He bowed. “Well done.” Then they turned and discovered that there were far more people gathered in the seats.

“Come and see the insane married couple from Gondor fight!” the henna-bearded man was calling in Haradric. “Who will win the last round? One silver emperor’s crown for entry.”

They went and splashed water on their faces again, and stood back in the middle of the area, facing each other.

“Why were you sad, Thor?” Baradir called out.

“I had fallen in love with an extraordinary woman,” said Thor. “I did not think she would ever return my affection.” He blew a kiss to Idis.

“Compliments will get you nowhere,” said Idis, frowning. “I have no mercy.” A short time later, there was laughter from the crowd as someone evidently translated.

Then they bowed to each other. Neither could dodge in the same way as they had previously: they were both tired. Idis thought that she was fitter than her husband; he had been at a desk job longer. Her entire focus was on Thor’s movements. They did not speak any more.

Finally her husband seemed to drop his guard. She struck, and then realised too late it had been a feint. He touched her arm. “First blood.”

They looked at each other with wide eyes, panting heavily. The crowd roared with excitement. They both dropped their swords to the ground at the same moment, and moved towards each other. Suddenly Idis was in her husband’s arms, and they went to kiss—only to be interrupted by someone throwing water over them. Idis let go of Thor, spluttered and wiped the water off her face. There was much laughter behind them.

Arahaelon held a bucket, and looked simultaneously annoyed and amused. “That is enough of that.”

“They *are* married, however?” said the henna-bearded man, worriedly.

“Yes, married by his Majesty the King of Gondor and Arnor himself, so I have been told, but still—”

“Will you come back and fight again?” said the bearded proprietor to Thor and Idis, giving them a glinting gold smile.

Thor flicked wet hair from his face. “Only if you do not charge us for the use of the arena.”

“It is a deal, sahib, memsahib,” said the bearded man, and he spat and shook hands with Thor.

Idis and Thor put their covering garb back on, and they all went back to the Embassy, followed by a crowd of interested children, beggars and merchants.

Lady Nidhien was standing in the Embassy courtyard. “Where has everyone been?”

“Thor and Idis have been duelling, and Arahaelon threw water on them,” said Nallon, laughing.

Nidhien shook her head. “But—*what?*—when?—why?”

Thor shrugged his cloak open. His reddish hair was dark brown and wet, despite the Haradric heat. “We will explain later. Idis and I should change out of our damp clothes.”

They removed their cloaks and walked back to their room, ignoring the excited chatter and laughter in the courtyard. They began to strip off their wet clothing, and stopped and looked at each other for a long moment.

“I wanted to swyve you back there,” Idis said.

Thor laughed. “It is probably lucky Arahaelon threw water on us. I felt exactly the same way—”

Idis said, “Well, then, round four—” and they stripped off the remainder of their clothing and fell onto the bed together.

Idis smiled down at Thor once they had finished. “I win this round,” she said, somewhat breathlessly.

He laughed. “I will be unable to walk tomorrow, so there will not be a fifth round. We are even.”

Idis frowned. “You did not tell me you were good at sword fighting.”

Thor smiled up at her, with his limpid innocent face on. “I thought you checked my records, dear?”

“I missed that part.” Idis lay beside him.

“There was never much call for individual hand-to-hand combat with a sword if one was in a mounted infantry regiment. I mainly honed my skills so that my men did not lose too much money when they bet on me? Maybe they did not put it in my records?”

“We should go back to work before anybody realises what we’ve been doing—”

Thor grinned. “I suspect they must have *some* inkling. So much for restraining acts of public affection in front of colleagues?”

They got up and washed, brushed their hair and clothed themselves. Thor went to the kitchen and fetched two fried sugar donuts for each of them, and they walked back towards their desks.

“Where did you learn to fight like that, my Lady?” said Bergon, eyeing her with some anxiety and embarrassment.

“My parents,” said Idis, shyly, biting into the donut. “Mainly from Mummy and the Rangers when I was growing up, although I also learned from Daddy and my brothers. Mummy was a shield maiden of Rohan, and of course, Daddy was a Captain of Gondor, so I suppose you could say fighting is in the blood.”

“Your mother is not Éowyn of Rohan, the Lady of the Shield-Arm?” said Bergon, incredulously.

"The very same," said Thor.

"Well, she is a Lady of Emyrn Arnen now, of course," said Idis to Thor.

There was utter silence as the men stared at her. Then they turned to look at Thor.

Nallon shook his head. "Let me get this straight, Thor. You have married one of the Steward's daughters?"

Thor nodded, and Idis's heart sank as she saw her colleagues' faces close up and their expressions become wary. She hunched her shoulders and tried to make herself smaller.

"Can you read minds like your father, my Lady?" said Bergon.

Idis tried to relax and make a joke out of it. "I have already read you like a book, so it is too late to worry, Bergon."

No one laughed. Thor sensed Idis's anxiety, reached out and took her hand, and drew her closer to him. "Please do not judge my wife for her parents or change the way in which you behave to her. She got this position on her own merits. We did not tell you who she was at first because we were worried about just this. I wanted you to know her for herself first—"

"Is it true that Thor was attacked by assassins?" said Baradir.

Thor let go of Idis's hand, pulled up his sleeve and showed the angry red scar on his right upper arm: it had not faded. "Yes. The Khandians got me with a throwing dagger because, well, as Idis has pointed out, I was drunk, not that I could have fought with that snakebite poison in my system anyway—it was the worst pain I had ever suffered in my life—"

"At least I got you to confess your love for me while drunk and poisoned, so it is all well." Idis flicked out one of her daggers. "I won that round."

"SHIT!" said Bergon, leaping back, then put his hands over his mouth. "Sorry," he said in muffled tones.

"It seems you may have been right, Baradir," said Nallon, looking at his colleague with wide eyes, as Idis folded the dagger back up and hid it again.

"Do you assassinate people?" said Baradir.

"No, never. I was brought up to believe that defence of others is paramount," said Idis, seriously. Then she laughed. "When we first met, Thor offered to sacrifice himself for me and the greater good of Gondor. He is a *perfect* addition to my family."

Thor blushed and grimaced. "Do not tell them any more: it is ridiculously embarrassing."

Idis beamed at him. "But it was so sweet, and so misplaced!"

"You two are cloying," said Baradir. "To think that we suspected you had a marriage of convenience: nay, 'tis quite the opposite!"

“No wonder Arahaelon is jealous,” muttered Nallon.

“But why would he—?” said Thor. “He told me he never wished to marry, so—?”

Idis laughed as she met Nallon’s eye. “I will tell you later. You should go back to your desk and we should do some work.”

After Thor sauntered off, Baradir broke down into giggles. “O, that is precious. He was utterly oblivious. That answers *that* question, eh, Nallon?”

Bergon said, “I still do not quite understand.”

Arahaelon came out and glared at them all. “Can you not be quiet? Your chatter is disturbing me. Some people in this office must needs work.” Then he turned and went back to his office.

They apologised and fell silent, and Idis went back to reading her book on the importance of oases in Haradric trade and culture, and taking notes.

In the afternoon, Idis had been going to visit Romdaer’s mistress, but her plans were spoiled when the Ambassador came out to the communal office with a frown on his face. “I have had several reports of a man and a woman from our Embassy duelling publicly in Farzad’s arena. I realise that the Lady Idis must be one party, but which one of you was the other?”

Bergon said, “Did your wife not tell you? It was Thor.”

The Ambassador’s greying eyebrows rose. “Well, that is unexpected. Lady Idis, you seem to have turned our gentle Lord Thorongil into a lunatic—?”

He stomped around the corner, then brought back Thor, who sat on the edge of Idis’s desk.

The Ambassador faced them and said, “Lord Thorongil and Lady Idis, I expect to be consulted before you take action such as this. If you had told me of your plans, I would have not allowed it.”

“We apologise, Ambassador,” said Thor. “We did not mean to create a public spectacle. It was a joke that got out of hand.”

Idis nodded. “Yes, we apologise.”

The Ambassador harrumphed and went back to his office.

“You did not tell him that Arahaelon and Romdaer allowed you to duel,” said Bergon with confusion.

Thor stood and shrugged. “This Embassy is dysfunctional enough without me pointing that out.”

Nallon scratched his head. “But does the Ambassador not realise that you have always been a lunatic, Thor, just a very polite, quiet one? Sorry to point this out in front of your lady wife—”

Idis laughed. “My family is populated by very polite lunatics. I understand exactly who I married.”

That night, she and Thor went to bed early. Idis was about to fall asleep when Thor said, “Was Arahaelon one of the men who proposed to you and was rejected? Is that why he was jealous?”

Idis rolled over with difficulty (she was rather stiff and bruised) and faced him. “No, no, not at all, although Elboron told me that Arahaelon’s father did once try to marry him off to my sister Finduilas? But that would have been a very bad idea, on ever so many levels—at least one reason why it would have been so disastrous is because Arahaelon is not interested in women.”

Thor blinked. “What? Wait, *what*—?”

Idis raised an eyebrow. “O dear, Thor. I suppose you have not realised about Nallon and Baradir either.”

Thor gaped. “Wait—are they—*together*?”

Idis smiled at him. “You are hopeless, my darling. Yes, I am pretty sure they are together. It is easier for childless men who will never marry to come out here. Look how unhappy Nidhien is.”

Thor was still gaping. “O! Now I understand.” Then he paused. “By the Valar, Arahaelon did not ... *like* me ... did he?”

Idis kissed him. “Darling, who could not like you? But yes, I strongly suspect that he hoped that you might at least be open to a liaison—”

Thor winced. “I did not realise. We have often stayed up late together in his rooms, drinking wine and talking about poetry. He is the only person here who has the same kind of intellectual interests as me—at least until you. He did, in fact, invite me to spend the night several times, and I told him that my bed was more comfortable than his couch. I wondered why he looked at me oddly, but he was most polite. O, this is most awkward, because as you well know, I am not like that, whatever Ecthelion may think—”

Idis chuckled. “Arahaelon enjoyed throwing water over us. Cathartic?”

“I feel extremely foolish,” said Thor. “I am not naïve, but it never occurred to me that someone might like me in that way—”

Idis smiled at him, unable to understand how such a wonderful person could be unaware of his quality. “You never considered that anyone, male or female, would be attracted to you, I think; and thus you did not interact with people with that possibility at the forefront of your mind. I had to kiss you before you would believe that I liked you, if you recall?”

Thor yawned. “I am lucky you were persistent.”

Idis yawned too, infected by his yawn. “We should try to sleep.”

The next morning, on the way to breakfast, Idis was indeed stiff and sore. She saw the three old courtyard sweepers gathered in the corner, talking seriously. She ambled over to see what was wrong. The courtyard men looked at her guiltily.

“Is anything wrong, grandfathers?” she asked.

"We are getting rid of flies in the Haradric way," said the oldest one. "Do not tell the Emir."

Idis clapped her hands. "O, a spider?"

The men all beamed. "Yes, memsahib," said one. "Would you like to meet her?"

"I would love to meet her," said Idis. The old men brought out a small cage, and opened the door. A large brown and orange furred spider came out and sat on one man's hand, and hiss-barked.

Idis thought of Aunt Nilofar's spiders when she was a child, and said, "Does she fetch?"

The old man holding the spider said, "Yes, would you like to see?" They put the spider down and threw a small piece of palm frond. The spider scuttled to pick it up, and then brought it back, and hissed in triumph.

"What a good girl," said Idis, holding the spider, and petting it—her mother had always been very unhappy when she played with the Dol Amroth spiders, for reasons she did not understand—then became aware that someone was standing behind them. She turned, hiding the spider, but it was just her husband.

"Is everything well?" he said in Westron.

"I am admiring this spider," she said.

Thor's face brightened, and he said in Haradric, "O, a bird-eater! He is a beauty!"

The old men beamed, and then one said, "She is a girl. That is why she is so beautiful."

"May I hold her?" Thor asked, and Idis let the spider move to his hand.

Then Nidhien came up and barked in Haradric, "Sweepers! What is this laziness? Get to work! I turn you onto street if you not—"

Thor turned to her and said in Westron, "O I am so sorry, my Lady. Do not blame the men. It is entirely Idis's and my fault. We are admiring this beautiful—" and then he held the large spider up to Nidhien's face. The spider hissed at her and raised its two front legs.

Nidhien screamed, "By the Valar!" and went pale and fled.

Thor gently returned the spider to the old men, and said in Haradric, "It is very unfortunate. Some people do not appreciate how useful spiders are when they catch flies, grandfathers."

One of the old men grinned. "Most unfortunate, sahib."

Idis said, "Wait, so the particularly large and beautiful spiders are always female?"

The old men nodded. "Yes. The male ones are small and ugly, and the female ones eat them after mating."

Thor grimaced, and shied away from Idis. "I feel very lucky today that I am not a spider."

The old men laughed. "He is very funny, memsahib," they said to Idis. "So very funny."

As Idis walked to breakfast, she started to laugh too. "I cannot wait to write to Cousin Amrothos. I finally know the answer to the mystery of why he could never breed spiders in Dol Amroth! He had three females."

"The males had a lucky escape," said Thor, shuddering.

Later, when she was sitting at her desk writing a ciphered letter to Amrothos about the spiders, the Ambassador came storming out of his office and went around the corner to where Thor's desk was. Then he came back and stood in front of Idis's desk. "Where is Lord Thorongil, Lady Idis?"

"He is at the market with Deputy Ambassador Arahaelon, Ambassador. Is there any problem I can help you with in his absence?"

The Ambassador frowned. "I am given to understand that your husband held a very large spider up to my wife's face. First the sword fighting and now this—?"

Idis sighed. "Yes, I am afraid that he did. He feels badly about distressing her. He is buying her a present to apologise, as well as collecting information for Lord Romdaer about the price of spices."

The Ambassador said, "Surely he realised that a Lady would be distressed by a large spider?"

"I had just been holding it, patting it, and playing fetch with it, so, no, he did not," said Idis.

"O, I see," said the Ambassador, looking mollified, and went back into his office.

Once the Ambassador was gone, Baradir started to snigger uncontrollably. "Thor held one of those giant furry spiders up to Nidhien's face?"

Idis carefully kept her face neutral. "Yes."

Nallon burst out laughing too. "It is not as if things were not awkward enough—everyone loves Thor—"

"Shh," hissed Baradir, poking Nallon in the shoulder with his forefinger.

Idis put her head back down and kept writing her letter. She had noticed that Thor and Nidhien avoided one another, and presumed it was simple dislike. Now she wondered if there was more to it.

Before lunch, Thor came back and stopped by her desk. "I have information on the price of spices for you."

"What did you get Nidhien?" asked Idis.

Thor held up a paper box and made a face. "Sticky sweet treats." He sighed. "Could you kindly accompany me while I give them to her once we have eaten?"

After they had eaten lunch, Idis joined him, although she was confused as to why her presence was needed. They walked down the corridor to the Ambassador's more extensive living quarters. Thor

bowed and said to one of Nidhien's maids, "Could you tell Lady Nidhien that I have a present for her to apologise for the spider incident this morning?"

The middle-aged woman looked down her nose. "I will tell my Lady that you are here, Lord Thorongil. She was most upset."

"I know," said Thor, with an appropriately woebegone look. "I am sorry."

The maid went off, and then said, "My Lady will see you now. Your wife may wait here." The maid led Thor off, who glanced back at Idis anxiously. After they had left, Idis quietly stood and followed them.

Thor was led to a sitting room. Idis hung back until the maid had left, and then crept up and watched through a crack in the door.

Nidhien looked up from the book she was reading and said, "I gather you have come to apologise, Lord Thorongil?"

"Yes, I have brought you a present, Lady Nidhien." Thor kissed her hand and handed over the box.

"You were a very naughty boy," said Nidhien, in arch tones, and Thor stepped back swiftly so he was well out of her vicinity.

"I was thoughtless. I am very sorry."

"I have to say, I was most surprised when you came back to Harad wed," said Nidhien. "Why did you marry that great tall woman in such haste?"

After an awkward pause, Thor said, "I asked her, and she said yes. I must get back to Idis, as she is waiting outside. I hope you enjoy the sweets, and I apologise again for the spider."

Nidhien giggled. "Apology accepted, Thor. Come back when your wife is not waiting next time."

Idis quickly stepped back out to the room where she had been waiting.

They walked together back to the office. Idis wrinkled her nose at her husband as they went past the fountain. "*I asked her, and she said yes?*"

Thor flushed. "I was put on the spot. I should have *known* you would listen. I am terrible at that kind of conversation—"

"We will discuss this later," said Idis, when they reached the office, crossing her arms. She was suddenly afraid that her husband had slept with Nidhien and not told her; this might explain the awkwardness between Nidhien and Thor. If this was the case, Idis would have preferred to have been warned.

"Later, then," said her husband stiffly, and went back around the corner to his desk.

The other men pretended to work.



Finally, Nallon said quietly, "Thor does not like sticky, sweet treats, Lady Idis." Nidhien's name meant 'honeycomb-girl'.

Baradir looked up too. "No one likes them, other than the Ambassador, I suppose? Although even then, I'm not quite sure—"

"Occasionally *someone* makes the mistake of sampling them and feels unwell afterwards," said Nallon, looking significantly at Bergon.

Bergon blushed. "I will tell the Lady about some of the things you boys like to do in the filing room if you keep going?"

Nallon made a face at Bergon, and they dropped the subject.

Idis stood. "Does anyone need anything from the market?"

No one spoke, so Idis went back to her room to fetch the black cloak and then paused when she saw a package on her pillow. Inside was a brown silk scarf with gold thread through it. She walked back to the office, and went to her husband's desk. "Was the scarf from you?"

Her husband's shoulders relaxed, and he looked up and smiled sweetly. "Yes."

"I am going to the market to get spice prices. Thank you for the gift; it is lovely. Just the colour I like—"

"I am so glad. I have written down the spice prices, so we can compare the prices you get to the prices I get."

Then Idis changed into the black Haradric cloak and got the purse they used for small change.

First, she went to the spice shop she had been to two days ago, and bought several different kinds of spices, haggling furiously with the merchant. The merchant laughed. "I knew you would be back."

Then she looked at a stall with leather wallets, and bought one for Thor as an apology, with mûmakil stamped on it. "Mûmakil are good luck," said the leather merchant.

Finally, she made her way to Romdaer's former mistress's apartment, and knocked on the door. A slave came to the door. "Could you tell the lady of the house that I have come in relation to a certain man of Gondor?"

Shortly afterwards, an attractive dark-haired woman with green eyes came to the door, and stared at Idis. "Who are you?" she said. "Are you my replacement?"

"No," said Idis. "But I think we should speak, Soraiya Hatun."

Soraiya laughed. "I am no lady. Come in."

She led Idis upstairs to a pleasant cool room with green plants and reclining lounges. "Can I get you some *café*?"

Idis took off the woman's garb; she was hot and uncomfortable. "Yes please."

Soraiya gaped. "You are not Haradrim? What are you? You do not look entirely Númenórean, although your eyes and your chin shape—"

"We need to speak," said Idis.

"But how do you speak like—?"

"I was taught by a woman from Northern Harad as a child, but I was born in Gondor."

Soraiya glanced at the gold wedding ring on Idis's finger and stared. "You are not Romdaer's wife?"

"I am married, but not to Lord Romdaer. The government of Gondor knows about you and Romdaer. You will not get any more money from him. You will have to find a new lover."

"What happens if I decide I do not want to listen to you, woman of Gondor?"

Idis frowned. "That would be unfortunate, woman of Harad." She shrugged. "We can deal with this problem pleasantly, or in a more unpleasant way. Which do you prefer?"

"Are you threatening me?" said Soraiya, and then took a breath as if to prepare to shout.

"Not presently. You have welcomed me into your home and served me refreshment. I am not ignorant of the customs of Harad." Idis sipped the *café* brought in by a silent woman. "How much will it take to get you to stop badgering Romdaer?"

Soraiya named a sum. Idis sniffed. "That is far too high." She named a significantly lower sum.

Soraiya raised her hands and wailed. "You insult me, Lady—?"

"You may call me Lady ... Mystery."

Soraiya shook her head. "This is ridiculous." Then she named a slightly lower sum.

They sipped *café* and haggled back and forth for some time until finally they reached a sum which was mutually acceptable.

"I will ensure that this money is delivered to you tomorrow," said Idis. "I am trusting that you are a woman of honour?"

Soraiya looked offended. "Of course, Lady *Mystery*. What a ridiculous name, I say again."

Idis laughed. "I could not think of anything better." Then she spat on her palm, and Soraiya did the same, and they shook hands.

"You are pragmatic for someone from Gondor," said Soraiya.

Idis said, "My mother is not from Gondor; she is a very pragmatic woman." She rose. "In any case, the money will be delivered tomorrow, and this matter ends now."

"I will not say that it was a pleasure to meet you," said Soraiya. "But it was intriguing."

Idis put the cloak back on and bowed. "Likewise. I wish you all the best in finding a new lover, but I would avoid trying to get money from any government officials of Gondor henceforth. I will show myself out."

Then she went down the stairs, past the startled slave, and let herself out of the door, and back onto the street.

When she got back to the Embassy, she dumped her packages and the cloak on the bed, and then went and knocked on Arahaelon's door.

"Yes?" said Arahaelon. "Come in."

Idis came in and closed the door. "Lord Romdaer's problem will go away for the sum of 200 silver emperor's crowns."

Arahaelon winced. "That is more than I wanted to pay."

"It is better than the 1500 initially asked for," said Idis. "And really, is it not neat to pay to get rid of this problem?"

"Your methods are unorthodox."

"The lady observed the same thing, but you do not need to lose a competent staff member—"

"Thank you, my Lady," said Arahaelon stiffly. "I will let Romdaer know that there is nothing to fear from this quarter anymore."

Idis went back to her room and collected the spices. Then she put the wallet on Thor's pillow, put the scarf he had given her on, and went to her husband's desk.

"Let us compare the prices I had to pay for spices with yours." To their interest, Thor had been charged over four times as much as she had. They showed the results of their research to Romdaer, who asked them to try other merchants and other goods which were imported into Gondor so they could work up the mark-up.

"All is well now with you and Thor?" said Baradir when she sat back down at her desk.

Idis nodded. "Good," said Nallon, happily.

That night, she explained to her husband that Romdaer's mistress was no longer in the picture. "I ensured she was paid off. I have told Arahaelon."

"Good." Thor looked at the wallet on his pillow. "Thank you for the wallet, darling; I love the design."

Idis hung her head. "I am sorry for getting jealous about Nidhien—I just suddenly had a fear that maybe you had known her in some way, and—"

Thor shuddered. "No! No! I should have told you that she has made play for all the men here—now I know why she has not had any success with anyone other than a very short *affaire* with Bergon!—but I thought she would stop with me now that you are here. I have rejected her advances several

times, and tend to avoid her. She repulses me; I have never been in the least bit tempted by her.” He paused. “I confess: I deliberately put that spider near her face. It was very much worth it to see her scream and run, even if I did have to give her a present afterwards.”

“My dear, crafty Thorongil, you make me laugh,” said Idis.

Her meeting with the Empress Mother was approaching quicker than she had expected. The next morning, Idis instructed her maids to get out her best embroidered linen dress and iron it.

“We will also need to get my green jewellery out of the safe,” she told them. “I am meeting the Empress Mother tomorrow.”

“This will be fun, my Lady,” said Tirien.

“I am nervous,” said Idis. “I shall re-read my books on how to address Emperors today.”

“You have met the King, have you not?” said Feriadis.

“That is different: he is like an uncle.”

She organised for the money to be couriered to Soraiya, then went to her desk and read several books about the etiquette of the Haradric Emperors. After lunch she spoke to Arahaelon.

“What would you have me talk to the Empress Mother about?” she asked.

Arahaelon said, “We are interested in the position of the Emperor, obviously. While we suspect his mother controls him, this is ideal for Gondor. Under her rule, Harad has become much more stable. Even four years ago, before she took control, we were unable to employ local servants.”

“Do you have any advice for me?”

Arahaelon leaned back in his chair. “Our intelligence tells us that the current Emperor is rather spoiled, but that his mother is extremely intelligent and ruthless.” He paused. “The Emperor had several half-siblings in the harem, but they all met plausible accidents, my Lady.”

Idis winced. “I see. I suppose I shall not be able to wear my daggers?”

Arahaelon snorted. “No. I do not think anything will happen to you. The tone of the letter your father showed me indicates that the Empress Mother is primarily curious. But we are curious too. The Chief Eunuch Bijaan is her main rival for power—would you be able to see how things stand between them?”

“I shall try,” said Idis. “I really do not like the fuss this will involve.”

A grumpy smile spread across Arahaelon’s face. “It is interesting that you mention this. I have organised a palanquin for you, as is suitable for a Princess.”

Idis sighed. “I suppose it is necessary. I really would rather not.”

Arahaelon laughed at her. “Bad luck, my Lady.”

That evening, Thor inspected the ironed dress standing in the corner of their room. "Not a silk dress? It is linen."

"No. I thought it best to show off the fabric Gondor can make."

It took Idis some time to fall asleep. She ended up asking Thor to make love to her to help her allay her anxiety. She remained astonished by how necessary intimate relations had become to her: seven months earlier, she would have scoffed at the notion.

The next morning, she arose very early, and washed, but left her long hair dry. Thor was still asleep, snoring softly, and she pulled the sheets over him gently.

Tirien and Feriadis came in with the jewellery, combs and hair pins.

"I brought some perfume too," whispered Tirien, and they applied it and let it dry, before putting on the dress and buttoned it up. The two maids put her hair up.

"I think we will actually leave half of it down," said Feriadis quietly. "There is so much of it."

"We could have a braid coming around here?" muttered Tirien, around the pearl-headed hair pin she had in her mouth. Idis closed her eyes and let her maids argue about what they wanted to do. Eventually, after an hour, they had finished to their satisfaction.

Idis inspected the braids. "That is wonderful."

"Wait, we have to put the coronet in," said Feriadis under her breath. She did so, while Tirien fastened the necklace.

Idis inspected the necklace in the bronzed mirror: a complex arrangement of emeralds coiled in twists of white gold, surrounded by rubies, topaz and sapphires. "I think this one is best because it has more green than any of the others," she said quietly.

"Where did you get it from?" said Feriadis with interest.

"Mother loaned it to me," said Idis. "The Dwarves made it for her, of course." Then she laughed. "If I were my mother, I would be wearing three such necklaces. She believes that you cannot wear too much jewellery. My father thinks it is hilarious."

Idis realised she had laughed too loudly when Thor sat up and yawned. He stared at her sleepily. "Good morning, Princess Idis." Then he said, "Do you suppose you could all close your eyes while I run to the toilet?"

Idis rolled her eyes at him in the mirror. "It is nothing I have not seen before." Her maids laughed.

Thor coloured. "It seems wrong for you to see me naked when you look like that."

"Our eyes are closed," said Feriadis. Both maids had put their hands over their eyes.

Thor dashed out, grabbed his breeches and ran into the bathroom, while Idis admired his backside.

"You can look now," he called from the bathroom.

"I already was," said Idis, and all the women laughed.

Thor emerged and put his shirt on. "How are you going to eat breakfast, Idis?"

"I shall not have breakfast, darling. I expect the Empress Mother will feed me in any case." Idis frowned. "Could you put my shoes on, ladies?"

Her maids put her shoes on, and she stepped out into the courtyard, intending to fetch her book on the history of Harad. On her way, she passed Bergon.

Bergon gaped and bowed deeply. "My Lady. You look—beautiful."

Idis blushed; she had never known how to deal with this kind of attention. "Thank you. I am seeing the Empress Mother today."

She sat in her room and read her books again, but they just made her feel anxious and panicky. Then she sat and tried to steady her breath, and wished she could take Thor with her: he made social occasions bearable. Suddenly she remembered what her father had whispered to her just before he had escorted her into the Emyrn Arnen Great Hall to marry Thor: "It is all an act, Idis. Pull back your shoulders and put your head up and you will be fine."

Her maids came in and put kohl on her eyes and a little powder on her cheeks to soak up the sweat. Then Arahaelon came in and drew in his breath. He bowed deeply. "My Lady. Your palanquin is here."

Idis went out into the courtyard and found that most of the staff of the Embassy were there, watching. She was pleased to see that Lady Nidhien's face went white at the sight of her.

The courtyard sweepers and the cleaners prostrated themselves in front of the fountain. Idis said in Haradric, "Please do not."

"We did not realise you were an Empress," wailed their cleaner, her forehead on the pavement.

Thor sensed Idis's dismay. "She is still the same person as the woman who played fetch with a spider," he said, coming up and taking Idis's arm. "Just think of that."

This did not help. "You are a *damat*," said the cleaner to Thor, still prostrated. "We are not worthy." Idis did not recognise the word; it was not something she had ever discussed with Aunt Nilofar or her tutors.

Thor helped her get into the palanquin, and Ambassador Galador got in the other side, bearing the gift her parents had sent separately from Minas Tirith.

"I will accompany you to the Palace, my Lady, but I will not go to your meeting," Galador said. She noted that he was also dressed in a very fine suit.

The servants lifted them up, and took them up the hill to the Emperor's Palace.

About half way there, she decided that she did not like palanquins. The space smelled strongly of sandalwood. It was hot and stuffy in the red velvet box, and she wished she had thought to bring a

fan. The bumping up and down was making her feel slightly ill, and she leaned her head against the side of the box and closed her eyes, but then sprang back up so as to not squash her hair.

Eventually, after several stops, and conversations between guards outside and the Ambassador, they stopped. The Ambassador got out first, and then helped Idis down. She gasped. They were in the middle of an extraordinary courtyard, all gleaming white marble and airy fountains, with peafowl strutting around. After the dark and fusty palanquin, it was almost blinding. The Ambassador helped her get her skirts straight, handed her the present, and then sat on the step of the palanquin. "I will wait here until you get back, my Lady," he said.

A pretty, dark-skinned, clean-shaven man dressed in dark blue silk pajamas approached, bowed low, and spoke quietly in a pleasant tenor voice. "Lady Idis, daughter of Faramir Prince of Ithilien and Steward of Gondor of the House of Húrin, and Lady Éowyn of Eryn Arnem, formerly a Lady of Rohan of the House of Eorl?"

Idis nodded and put her shoulders back. "Yes. That is me."

"Follow me," said the man, and so she did, through big bronze doors, and down long corridors with rich, coloured silken carpets which must have taken years to weave, passing several sets of guards. Idis was reminded then that she still needed to continue her research into the language of Haradric weaving.

They reached a doorway flanked by two very large guards, and the servant halted, fixing her with a serious gaze. "The Celestial Emperor, Uniter of the Emirates, Blessed Under Heaven, may he live forever, is in here. You must walk forward looking down, and prostrate yourself so that your forehead touches the ground, Lady Idis. Do not move unless the Celestial Emperor, may he live forever, allows it. The Radiant Mother thought you might need these instructions."

"Thank you," said Idis. She had in fact known from her books on etiquette, but she was thankful for the confirmation.

Then she entered the room, head down, and looked at the beautiful purple carpet underfoot for guidance. As the carpet ended, she got down on her knees, put down the gift in front of her, and put her head on the floor, as she had seen the cleaners and the courtyard sweepers do earlier. It was somewhat difficult in her formal dress, and she feared that her beautiful braids were not going to be the same when she rose.

"Lady Idis, daughter of Faramir Prince of Ithilien and Steward of Gondor of the House of Húrin, and Lady Éowyn of Eryn Arnem, formerly a Lady of Rohan of the House of Eorl!" exclaimed someone in a loud alto voice. Idis thought the owner of the voice was male, but she was not entirely sure. She wondered if the person was one of the unmanned her book had described, and then she wondered if the previous servant had also been unmanned.

There was a long pause, then a young male voice, similar in timbre to her youngest brother Dior's voice, spoke. "Interesting. She is very tall. Can you get her to sit up so I may look at her? I have never seen a woman of Gondor before."

"Lady Idis, you may sit up," said the person with the husky alto voice.

Idis carefully sat up and readjusted her hair and dress, and picked up the gift again, but did not look up or speak. She reflected that prostration was quite annoying, and resolved to tell Uncle Aragorn

that she was glad that she only had to bow to him. At least she could see the columns either side of her, all guarded by serious soldiers.

“Hmm. She is very fair, very fair indeed. Look at that gold sheen to her hair: it is like polished wood—” said the young male voice, appreciatively. Idis’s arms prickled and she tried to keep her face still, but she feared her eyes had widened.

A female voice laughed. “Celestial Emperor, the Lady is married, and I do not think Gondor would be happy if you kept her. We do not want either her parents or her many brothers on our doorstep. Remember that Captain-General Cirion is one of her brothers.”

To Idis’s horror, the young male sounded sulky. “Honoured Mother, you never let me have fun. If you could have your way, I’d still be stuck in the harem with you.”

Idis kept very still, but every muscle in her body was tensed. She was suddenly heartily glad she was alone and had left Thor behind. If seventeen-year-old Dior behaved like that to a guest, her mother would have made him clean the cow byre after the cows had been in it all winter, and then smacked him with the butt of a spear. Much worse, her father would have given Dior his “I am very, very disappointed” look. Idis and her siblings had all been more afraid of that particular punishment than any other.

The woman said, “Celestial Emperor, you are scaring her, and that is no way to treat a guest.”

The young man sighed. “Well, honoured Mother, you may as well have *café* with her then.”

“Lady Idis is given permission to leave the presence of the Celestial and Blessed Emperor, may he live forever,” said the person with the husky alto voice.

With some relief, Idis picked up her gift, rose, and backed out, eyes still downcast, in the fashion she had read was necessary in her books. As she exited the doorway, she risked glancing up for the briefest moment out of the side of her eye. A gangly blue-eyed boy in his late teens with a wispy beard lounged on an ornate gold and ivory throne, with a tall, fat beardless man in richly embroidered dark blue silk pajamas standing on his left side, slightly behind him. A person whom she presumed was the woman stood on the other side, clad in layers of purple silk, but all Idis could see of her was grey eyes through a space in her veil.

When the gilded, jewelled doors to the room shut, she stood up fully, and looked at the blue garbed man from earlier, who was still waiting for her. “Shall I wait here?”

“You are shown great honour. The Empress Mother has asked to convey you to the harem to have *café* with her,” said the man, dropping his gaze. “Follow me.”

Idis was then taken through another confusing maze of corridors, but noticed that they seemed to be more ‘lived-in’: there were ornate cabinets inlaid with mother of pearl, exquisite painted vases, and silk hangings depicting people, birds and animals. Out the window she saw other courtyards. As they progressed, there were less normal guards and more blue-clad men like her guide: Idis now guessed it was a uniform of sorts.

They progressed through a strange windowless long corridor, and then reached a guard post. The guards let them in, and Idis saw she was in yet another courtyard, this one with beautiful gardens and strutting peacocks and a tranquil lake, with apartments looking over the garden. It looked like



something from a story book, but there were very few people about. The man led her to an apartment down the bottom of the hill, and then took her inside.

Idis looked around curiously. The room was scattered with rich embroidered silk cushions and hangings, all in purples, golds and oranges, with a low table about a hand's breadth from the floor in the middle, all inlaid with mother of pearl in an exquisite geometric pattern. Several green-clad female servants knelt around the room, their heads bowed.

"Please sit here and wait," said the man. "The Empress Mother will join you shortly."

Idis sat down with crossed legs on the cushions near the table, and put the gift down on it.

Another door opened on the other side of the room, and the purple-clad woman came in, no longer veiled. Up close, she was immaculately made up, with skin the colour of milky tea, angular grey eyes, and a slightly aquiline nose. Idis could see a resemblance to Aunt Nilofar, but the Empress Mother was more exotically beautiful: in fact, she looked like some of the women Idis had seen in the paintings in the palace corridor.

"Greetings, Lady Idis!" Then the Empress Mother turned and spoke to the other people in the room. "I would speak to the Lady privately. Only Zara and Aasiyah's attendance will be necessary. Leave." She flicked her fingers, and the servants left, apart from two green-clad women, still kneeling in the corner, some distance away.

Idis rose and curtsied, and to her surprise, the Empress Mother kissed her on both cheeks. Idis somewhat gingerly kissed her back, and said, "Greetings, Radiant Mother of the Emperor, may he live forever." Then they both knelt down by the table, opposite one another.

The Empress Mother clicked her fingers, and one green-clad woman ran off.

"Well, this is nice," said the Empress Mother. "How is my mother's half-sister Nilofar Hatun doing in Dol Amroth?"

"My father's maternal cousin's wife is doing very well," said Idis. She had ascertained that there was a specific Haradric word for this relationship.

The Empress Mother laughed. "She has taught you well, for you to know 'father's maternal cousin's wife'. You have her accent, the accent of Amrun. It was my accent, once."

"I have brought a gift from Gondor." Idis pushed the large jar she had been bearing across the table. "It is honey from my parents' estate in Emyn Arnen."

The Empress Mother's kohl-outlined eyes widened, and she beamed. "Honey! I have never seen so much honey in one receptacle before! And this coloured glass! It is beautiful."

Idis silently thanked her mother for helping her with the gift. "It is blown in Minas Tirith. We know from Nilofar Hatun how glass is prized in Harad; we cannot make plate glass like you do, but we do make beautiful containers."

Then the female servant came back in bearing the *café* and poured it, then returned to her kneeling position at the other end of the room. Idis waited until the Empress Mother drank and then took a

sip. “Mmm! This is, unsurprisingly, the best *café* I have ever had. I look forward to telling my husband about it when I get back to the Embassy.”

“I heard you are newly wed,” said the Empress Mother. “To a *damat*, no?”

Idis blinked to hear that word again. “I am sorry; my Haradric is not perfect. That is the second time I have heard that word today, but I do not know it.”

“A *damat* is a man who enters a royal house by marrying the daughter of a King or Prince.”

“Well, yes, I suppose Thor is one of those. He is noble, but of a much lower caste—”

The Empress Mother looked her up and down. “It was late for you to marry. I am surprised your father allowed it.”

“Yes. I married even later than Nilofar Hatun.” Idis shrugged and blushed. “I had never met a man I wanted to marry before I met my husband.”

The Empress Mother smiled. “O, a love marriage, how *adorable*! I do hope he is pretty, and younger than you?”

“He is three years younger than me,” Idis confessed. “He is very pretty and has beautiful auburn hair because he comes from Lossarnach. He hates it, but I love it.”

The Empress Mother sighed. “Now I wish I had made you bring your *damat*, just so I could see that hair. But then we would have to be chaperoned by Bijaan or one of the other eunuchs, and they are very annoying.” To Idis’s utter shock, she giggled. “I am guessing from your blush that he is good in bed?”

Idis was not quite sure what to say. Eventually she said, “You may be right: but he would hate the fact that we are having this conversation. People of Gondor are *very* inhibited.”

“I have noted the same thing,” said the Empress Mother. “Loose in some ways, and very uptight in others.” She paused. “I liked the way you dealt with Romdaer Khan’s mistress, by the way.”

Idis almost spat her *café* out. “I have the advantage that my mother is not from Gondor, as I told the mistress,” she said carefully. “My mother is a very pragmatic and physical woman.”

The Empress Mother laughed. “Clearly so, given she has birthed ten children. We have been told she is very beautiful in a barbaric way, and that your father is quite besotted by her.”

Idis sighed. “Yes. I do wonder if this is why I did not marry until now: my expectations for marriage were somewhat warped by their example.”

“Mother was very surprised when her half-sister Nilofar wed,” said the Empress Mother.

“No more than my late great-Uncle was when Lord Amrothos wed, or so Father tells me: I was but a babe in arms. And then when they produced three sons, I do not think the rest of the family could believe it. My Aunt Loti is still agog—”

"You did say they were well?" said the Empress Mother. "Can you give me some more detail for my mother?"

"They have a house on the peninsula in Dol Amroth where they conduct experiments," said Idis.

"They have given up breeding spiders, and have numerous cats instead. Nilofar Hatun says cats are just like spiders, except that spiders come when you call."

"It sounds as if Nilofar has not changed at all: she was always eccentric, Umma says."

Idis leaned in. "Do you know the best part? Amrothos is probably one of the most ... eccentric ... people I know. But Nilofar and Amrothos's sons are normal, probably the most normal people in my entire extended family."

The Empress Mother laughed until she cried, and carefully wiped her eyes with her fingers so her kohl did not smudge. "I cannot wait to tell my mother. It is this kind of information that does not come through in Nilofar's letters."

"Nilofar is very proud of you, and we are all happy that Harad is more stable, and that the war between us ended. The King and my parents would not have let me come here otherwise."

"Yes." The Empress Mother sighed and looked into the distance. "I fear my son has been spoiled. I hope he will grow up, now he has left the harem and become a man. He was the only one of his siblings to live past the age of two, and I doted on him as a result."

Idis raised an eyebrow. "How tragic!"

"Utterly tragic. Those women were devastated. I was so lucky to keep my child."

Idis had an uncomfortable moment: there was a shadow of something ruthless in the Empress Mother's face which reminded her rather of her older sister, Finduilas.

"Your son is very precious to both you and Harad, then," she said.

The Empress Mother smiled. "I am pleased with how perceptive you are, Lady Idis." She paused, and made a gesture at the two green-clad women, who bowed down and pressed their faces to the floor. "If there was ever any threat to my son, it would be in the interests of both our realms to deal with it."

Idis sat up. "Of course. However, Gondor does not lightly interfere in the affairs of another realm."

"No, naturally it does not," said the Empress Mother. "But I understand your mother's birth realm of Rohan helps Gondor upon request?"

"There is a protocol: the King of Rohan must be sent the Red Arrow. It dates back to the time of my father's ancestor, Steward Cirion."

The Empress Mother clicked her fingers, and a fresh pot of *café* was brought out, along with the sticky sweets favoured by Lady Nidhien. They ate and drank silently, and then the Empress Mother said, "I understand that you and your husband discovered that the Khandians had infiltrated some aspects of your public service?"

“Yes, that is how we met.”

“Harad is very grateful to Gondor for disclosing the information you discovered to our Embassy.”

Idis watched the Empress Mother closely. “Of course we disclosed it. As I noted earlier, Harad and Gondor are no longer at war, apart from border disputes and bandits.”

“The Khandians, on the other hand, believe that they are still at war with everyone, including Gondor, Harad, Rhûn, and their own people. They do not believe that Sauron was really defeated.”

Idis looked at her empty cup. “My parents saw the moment when He was defeated; they were standing on a wall in Minas Tirith. The One Ring melted in the fires of Sammath Naur: my parents were friends with the Halflings who achieved this feat.”

“The Khandians think that it was a lie and Sauron will return, like the last time, in Númenor. Chief Eunuch Bijaan tells me I need not fear the Khandians—that they are mad fools—but my instinct and your experience tells me otherwise.” The Empress Mother rose. “It has been *most* pleasant to meet you, Idis Hatun. I am afraid that I have other matters to attend to, but I should like to see you again.”

“I am immensely honoured. I shall write to Nilofar and tell her how her family is. She will be very pleased: she was very excited to hear I was coming to see you.”

The Empress Mother’s eyes crinkled with mirth. “I am still laughing at your revelation: her children are normal.”

They embraced and kissed each other on each cheek again, then the Empress Mother left.

The same man in the blue silk uniform returned to collect her. Idis inspected him more closely: he was slightly plump and feminine looking, with huge long-lashed brown eyes, a delicate chin, and smooth cheeks. She was now almost sure he was a eunuch too: other than him, she had only seen women and other blue-clad men in the harem. The man bowed. “I shall take you back to your palanquin.”

Somehow the immense marble-carpeted corridors seemed shorter on the way back. The Ambassador sighed with relief at her return, but they did not say anything to one another. He simply helped her back into the stuffy, perfumed palanquin, and they bumped back down the hill to the Embassy.

She got out of the palanquin and said, “I need to get changed out of this clothing,” and went back to her room where her maids and Thor were waiting anxiously. The maids took off the dress and removed her jewellery and unpinned her hair.

Idis let her hair out and massaged her aching scalp. “Thank you, ladies, my hair managed to survive prostration upon the ground mostly intact.” Then she got back into her normal clothing.

“Well?” said Thor.

“The Empress Mother wanted to know if you were good in bed,” said Idis, plaiting her hair into a thick braid.

Thor blushed. “No! She did not! You jest with me!”

Idis and the maids laughed, then Thor said, shyly, "How did you answer?"

Idis grinned. "I certainly did not deny it."

Thor sat down on the bed and stared. "You must be making this up?"

"It was, in fact, the least disturbing part of the conversation, other than the part where we agreed upon the fact that Lady Nilofar is extremely eccentric—"

Thor put his face in his hands. "Do *not* tell anyone else."

She kissed his head and said, "I will not, but your reputation with the Empress Mother of Harad is safe, darling."

Feriadis chuckled. "I will put your jewellery back in the Embassy safe, my Lady."

They went back into the courtyard and found the Ambassador waiting for them. "Shall we fetch Arahaelon and Romdaer?" Lord Galador said.

"Yes," said Idis.

They went into Galador's spacious office, lined with books and with potted palm trees in the corner, and Arahaelon and Romdaer joined them shortly afterwards.

Idis outlined the contents of her meetings with the Emperor and the Empress Mother, but did not mention the Empress Mother's comments on her parents' marriage, her own marriage, Romdaer's mistress, or her own comments on the protocol for Gondor seeking help from Rohan.

Thor looked disgusted. "The Emperor sounds vile, and in sore need of a spanking."

Arahaelon said, "He is better than the alternatives; put aside your personal feelings, or you will not be included in such meetings in the future." Thor subsided.

Idis laughed. "Actually, I had the same thought about spanking and more besides, including making him dig up half-thawed cow dung." She put her head on the side. "The mother was utterly ruthless, but I liked her much more than the son. I did not get a sense of the Chief Eunuch; I saw him only briefly."

The Ambassador leaned back. "These are interesting times. I was extremely doubtful about your appointment to this role, Lady Idis. I apologise: you have proven valuable."

Arahaelon bowed his head. "Agreed, Ambassador. I also offer an apology."

Idis nodded. "Thank you, but I understand your doubt. It was reasonable to fear that I was appointed as a favour to my parents."

They got up and left, and went back to their respective offices and desks. Idis exhaled when she got back to her desk. Nallon, Baradir and Bergon were looking stiff and uncomfortable again.

"Please do not do this! It was bad enough when it was the cleaners—"

“What was the Emperor like?” said Bergon, making a visible effort to be normal again.

“A spoilt brat,” said Idis. “In any case, I need to get back to my study of weaving. There were some beautiful carpets in the palace and I wish to ascertain their meanings.”

Some time later, Arahaelon came out. “I need you and Thor in my office,” he said curtly, then he marched back.

Nallon raised an eyebrow. “What is that about?”

Idis shrugged. “I expect we are in trouble for *something*—we seem to be making a habit of it.”

She fetched her husband, and they went to Arahaelon’s office. “Now tell me the parts you did not say in front of Galador,” said Arahaelon quietly.

“First, the Empress Mother knew about Lord Romdaer’s mistress and my means of dealing with her,” said Idis. “Secondly, I think she wants our help in foiling a Khandian plot against her son.”

Thor smiled. “Our reputation precedes us.”

Arahaelon said, “Well, I knew her spy network is coming to rival the Chief Eunuch’s—this only confirms it. When will you know if she wants your help?”

Idis said, “I mentioned that the way in which Gondor sought help from Rohan was to send the Red Arrow.”

As they stood, she said, “Can you tell us off when we leave? I told the others that we are in trouble.”

Arahaelon smiled sourly. “You should have prepared that expense report correctly, my Lady! I shall tell you off soundly.” Indeed, as they exited, Idis and Thor put their heads down as Arahaelon scolded them.

In the afternoon, one of the guards from the entrance of the compound came up bearing a scroll and a package wrapped in beautiful silk. Idis took the scroll gingerly and unrolled it. The note was from the Empress Mother, and simply said that it had been a pleasure to meet Idis, and that she hoped Idis and Thor enjoyed the present. At the bottom of the letter, as Idis had feared, under her signature, the Empress Mother had drawn a small red arrow, almost like a decorative flourish. The package contained a large jar of *café* beans.

“Do not tell me you have a secret admirer, Lady Idis?” said Nallon, laughing.

“No, it is from the Empress Mother. I do not know what one does with gifts of this sort? I shall consult the Deputy Ambassador.”

Arahaelon looked up as she entered, and frowned. “With what will you going to trouble me now, Lady Idis? Please, tell me no more public duels with your spouse—?”

“Not unless we get official permission from the Ambassador.”

Idis showed him the note and the *café*. Arahaelon raised his eyebrows. “Well. This is interesting.”

“What do I do with the beans? Must I declare them?”

Arahaelon laughed. “O, you sound like your father. Yes, there is a book to record gifts received in an official capacity. I do not think anyone will mind some beans, but if it concerns you, you may fill out the ledger.”

Idis showed Thor the beans and the note. His eyes sharpened as he looked at the Empress Mother’s signature, but he did not say anything. Instead, he fetched the ledger for her, and she filled it out, leaving a question-mark in the column which required her to stipulate the value of the gift.

Thor inspected the ledger solemnly. “I think *café* beans from the Empress Mother may be priceless, but a question mark will do.” Then he put the ledger back in the storeroom, and Idis went back to reading about oases, and wondering what the Empress Mother wanted them to do.

She and Thor kept up duelling after Arahaelon had a talk with the Ambassador. Idis had no idea what had been said, but there were no further objections. They got a lot fitter, although there was never a need for Arahaelon to throw water over them again, much to everyone’s disappointment.

The henna-bearded, gold-toothed man, Farzad, was delighted: he charged one silver emperor’s crown for entry and had a packed house. Half the City seemed intrigued by the mad fighting husband and wife from Gondor. Farzad offered to give them a small cut of his profits, but Thor and Idis did not think it was appropriate given their position in government.

Farzad shrugged. “Suit yourselves.” Instead he got one of his slaves to bring them apple tea and biscuits after bouts, apparently to salve his conscience.

For the next fortnight, Idis was quite happy. She enjoyed bantering with Nallon and Baradir. The courtyard men and the cleaners kept prostrating themselves, despite her pleas not to, and Bergon thought it was very funny. She really enjoyed the duelling and her trips around the market buying different goods at Romdaer’s behest, and she wrote up and translated various accounts of Haradric culture. This position with the Embassy was turning out to be more fun than she had thought.

But then the time came for Nallon and Baradir went back to Gondor with the confidential diplomatic bag. Idis put in a detailed account of events thus far for her father and the King. She was surprised how much she missed Nallon and Baradir after they left. Bergon’s Haradric was better, but he always did the absolute minimum necessary and attempted to shift blame for onto anyone other than himself when there was a mistake.

To make matters more complicated, Thor and Bergon were technically on the same level: Second Attaché, but Bergon had been in the position longer, whereas Thor was more fluent in Haradric, and more competent and hardworking. Her husband and Bergon had several fights, and things got much more uncomfortable once there were only three of them left. Idis would have loved to have told Bergon exactly what she thought of him, but she felt this would exacerbate the situation, so she kept quiet. However, Thor got upset when she did not defend him.

One morning, several days after Nallon and Baradir had left, Idis woke and went to the bathroom. She was several days late with her bleeding, and nothing had appeared overnight. She went back to bed and roused her husband. “I am late with bleeding.”

He blinked up with her, still half asleep, his short reddish hair ruffled. “What? You are—?”

"I do not know yet. Maybe? It sometimes comes late when I have been exercising. We will have to see." She was excited by the possibility.

"Do you feel well?" Thor sat up and kissed her.

Idis shrugged. "I feel normal. But I should not duel today, just in case."

Thor frowned. "No. I will run down and tell Farzad you are unwell."

For the three weeks, she did not bleed, and she started to feel unwell and nauseous. "It is what I thought it was," she said to her husband, with excitement. She found herself wondering what the child would look like and whether it was a girl or a boy.

Thor looked worried. "How are we going to get you home again? I did not even think of this possibility. I do not want you having our child in Harad."

The next morning, when she woke, Idis had cramps in her stomach. She suspected this was the illness her mother had told her about. "I do not feel at all well."

"O dear, do you want to lie abed?" Thor said.

"No, I shall try to work," Idis said. "It will keep my mind off it."

She forced herself to rise and eat a small amount, and to work at her desk. She had a meeting with Arahaelon about the discovery of an ancient statue of a King of Gondor which had been taken into a regional Haradric town. She tried to ignore the increasing discomfort in her stomach, but was suddenly wracked by a sharp pain in her abdomen which made her double over.

Arahaelon went to her. "Lady Idis, what is wrong?"

"I do not feel well. I should have stayed in bed."

Then to her horror she felt a warm gush between her legs.

"O no," she said faintly, as realisation dawned.

Arahaelon helped her get up and escorted her out of his room. Then he looked down. "No! You are bleeding!" Indeed, blood was now running down her legs and several small drops had fallen onto the ground.

Their cleaner was approaching the other way, and looked at Idis and then at the ground. Suddenly the barrier which had been between them since Idis's visit to the Imperial Palace shattered. "Poor daughter!" she said, and took Idis's arm. "I will take her to bed," the cleaner said to Arahaelon. "You get her *damat*."

The cleaner helped Idis change into a nightgown, put cloth between her legs to soak up the bleeding, and then helped her into bed. "This is the first time this has happened to you?"

Idis closed her eyes and tears started to well. "I am right? I am losing the baby."



The cleaner said, "This has happened to me many times. I have borne twelve children, but I lost at least seven in between."

At that point, Thor came bursting into the room, Arahaelon looking sombre behind him. "Arahaelon said you were injured in some way, darling?" said Thor.

The cleaner shook her head. "Foolish men, do you know nothing? She is losing a child."

Thor's face turned greenish-grey. "But—*what?*"

Idis closed her eyes so she would not have to see her husband's face, and grimaced as another cramp came. "I am sorry, my love."

Thor sat beside her and kissed her forehead. "What can I do? I do not know what to do." His voice became anguished. "What could I have done differently?"

"Go back to work, Thor. Please leave me."

As the men left, Idis heard Arahaelon say, "I have some Dol Amroth brandy in my room, Thor."

The cleaner hummed a tune while Idis lay on the bed and held her stomach.

"If you have not felt very unwell, it was not meant to be," said the cleaner, after a long time. "I have not noticed you vomiting? At least, that is my experience: the more unwell you are, the better the chance of keeping the child."

"My mother was always horrendously unwell with us, whereas I have only felt a little unwell. I suppose that is why we were all so healthy." Idis began to cry and held the pillow to her stomach. "Why am I the one who had this? I thought it would be easy, just as it was for Mother and my sisters."

"I am going to get you some round stones and heat them in boiling water," said the cleaner. "It will help. I will be back, daughter."

She left, and Idis dozed in between the cramps. When the door opened softly, she kept her eyes closed, expecting it to be her husband.

"Lady Idis?" said Nidhien. "Arahaelon told me."

"I suppose you are happy for my loss." Idis did not bother to open her eyes.

Nidhien drew in her breath with a hiss. "I would not be happy for any woman who had to suffer this, no matter how much I disliked her. I have had four miscarriages, Lady Idis."

Idis opened her eyes and looked at the other woman's pale, pretty face. Nidhien's artful makeup did not hide the pain and anger. "O! I am so sorry. I did not know, Lady Nidhien. I apologise; I am upset and in pain."

"That was in the first three years of my marriage. I have not fallen pregnant at all in the last three years." Nidhien turned away, her tone vicious. "This *place*: I hate this place. I hate Galador, and I hate all of you."

"I can understand that," said Idis. Then the door to her room opened again and her maids came in, accompanied by the cleaner.

Nidhien stood. "I will go."

"Thank you for coming," said Idis. "I do not feel so alone now."

Nidhien laughed harshly. "Yes, misery loves company, Lady Idis. That is the motto of this Embassy."

It took several days for the bleeding to slow. Idis was very grateful for the assistance of the cleaner and her maids. She tried to press numerous gifts onto the cleaner, who refused them. It became a game: Idis would hide gifts in the cleaner's pockets, and the cleaner would return them by hiding them in their drawers for Idis to find later.

Idis wrote a letter to the Empress Mother apologising that she was unwell, and would not be able to make their appointment for *café*. The Empress Mother wrote back and said that she was sorry to hear this, but that she hoped Idis recovered soon. Idis also wrote a heartbroken letter to her mother, and tried to project a semblance of strength, although she was not feeling it. As far as she knew, neither Finduilas or her mother had had miscarriages, nor had any of her brother's wives.

Thor and the other men tiptoed around her. She expressed her irritation with her husband. "Why are you doing this? I am not broken."

"It looks to me like you are a *little* broken, dear Idis," said Thor. She threw a pillow at him and he retreated.

She had *café* with the Empress Mother in the harem several days later. The Empress-Mother kissed her as normal, and then hugged her. "I am sorry, Lady Idis," she said in a cool voice.

"I am feeling better," said Idis, although the tears in her eyes belied her.

The Empress Mother sat, then she shook her head and sighed. "Of course, I had miscarriages after I had my son, may he live for ever. I do not know if it was related to the fact that I had him when I was so young? It took a long time to recover from his birth. But I could not tell anyone other than Zara and Aasiyah, my maids, because it might upon impact my status as concubine."

Idis realised then that the Empress Mother must have spies in the Embassy. She sat too, and her lip trembled. "I hope this does not mean I cannot carry any children to term." She realised as she said it that this had been the underlying fear which she had not admitted until now.

The Empress Mother laughed. "O dear, you think everything will go wrong thereafter? I very much doubt it." Then she shrugged one shoulder. "Even if it does, you will survive. You have many nieces and nephews to dote upon."

Idis was her mother's child. She did not cry again. She sipped her *café*, and discussed the weather and whether dates were particularly delicious at this time of year, as the Empress Mother hypothesised.

“O! I have some news which might cheer you up.” The Empress Mother smiled. “My brother Darius has written to me to say that he is engaged to be married, to the daughter of one of my father’s vassals.”

“How nice. Thor will be pleased to hear of Darius’s engagement,” said Idis politely. “They are friends, to the extent that diplomats of rival realms are allowed to be friends. They sometimes have lunch together.” To her immense shame she could not feel much joy or excitement, for all that she thought Darius Khan from Harad’s Embassy in Minas Tirith was a pleasant man.

“Darius also expresses some dismay that he is missing out on your antics in Beyazim, especially the duelling,” the Empress Mother said. “Will you start duelling your husband again?”

Idis said she did not know.

“I would like to see you and your *damat* duel,” said the Empress Mother, wistfully. “It sounds most entertaining. Darius would be so jealous if I saw it and he did not!”

When Idis got back to the Embassy, she found several letters waiting for her. She took them back to her desk to read them, which turned out to be a mistake; the letters had been written before anyone got her letter. Her father’s letter disclosed that Morwen was already pregnant with her first child, and that all was going well. Idis felt bad for getting upset, but despite her best intentions, the tears she had withheld during her meeting with the Empress Mother started to fall. She saw that one of the other letters was in Morwen’s handwriting and decided not to read it.

Her husband came to her desk to ask her for a book. “Do you have that book on cultural practices of the tribes of Southern—?” He stopped suddenly and looked at her. “What is wrong?”

“Nothing at all. By the way, the Empress Mother says Darius Khan got engaged.” Then Idis shoved the book at him. “Here is your book. Go.”

Thor wandered back to his desk, with several concerned backwards looks.

After an awkward silence, Bergon said, “I may regret saying this, but should you take a small break, Lady Idis?”

“That is probably a good idea. I am going for a walk around Beyazim. You may tell my husband where I am.”

She went down to the markets because she always found that soothing, and noticed that some new fruit and vegetables had come in since she last visited. It did not matter if she wept as she walked because the robes soaked up her tears anyway. She bought a strange green fruit out of curiosity, just one.

Then she went to her favourite spice merchant. He startled when she arrived. “I have not seen you for at least a week?”

“I have been ill,” said Idis.

“I am sorry to hear that,” said the merchant. Then his face brightened. “Turmeric is excellent for ill-health. This turmeric is fresh from Khand.”

Idis haggled and bought a small amount. Then she felt sick and tired so she went back to the Embassy. She went past her husband's desk to tell him about the turmeric. She was planning to give it to the cleaner as a present, but they still kept lists of prices. Thor was not at his desk.

Idis went back to her own desk. "Where is Thor?"

"He is having afternoon tea with Lady Nidhien," said Bergon.

Idis picked up an ink pot and threw it onto the ground, uttering a wordless shout as she did. Ink spilled everywhere.

Arahaelon came out. "What was that?" Then he looked at the black ink on the carpet.

"Thor is having afternoon tea with Lady Nidhien," said Bergon. "Lady Idis has views on this, as you might notice."

Arahaelon threw up his hands and spoke to the roof. "A nest of vipers would be easier to handle than this Embassy!" He turned and went back to his room.

Idis stared at the carpet with some misery and noted from the patten that it was evidently of a kind given to newly weds, with symbols of faithfulness and fecundity on it. She arranged for servants to take it be cleaned by the Embassy laundry. She hated to think what her father would think if he heard of her tantrum. Then she laughed, because her mother would understand. The servants bore off the carpet to the laundry with amazing equanimity.

When she got back, Thor was standing at Bergon's desk staring at the empty floor. "What happened to the carpet?"

Bergon laughed. "Your wife."

Thor looked at her, and Idis said, tightly, "We will discuss this later."

"It is not cut up into bits, is it?" said Thor, slightly apprehensively.

"No, it is just stained with ink," said Bergon.

That night, after dinner, Thor said, "So—what happened to the carpet?"

Idis would not look at him. "You had afternoon tea with *Nidhien*?"

"Yes. I worried that I had misjudged her unfairly after what you told me about her losing a child—" Thor frowned. "I would have told you where I was, but you were not at your desk."

Idis curled up in bed, her back to him. Thor got into bed with a sigh. "This cannot just be about Nidhien, can it?"

Idis buried her head in the pillow. "Morwen is pregnant. All is going well."

There was a long silence, then Thor said, "Ah. That was quick?"

Idis said into the pillow, "That is how it is for everyone in my family except me."

Thor patted her shoulder. "Maybe it is for the best that we are not having a child now. Things are difficult here—"

Idis sat up and glared at him. "You did not want our baby?"

"No! That is not what I am saying! By the Valar, Idis—I am just trying to think positively."

Idis curled back up. "I do not want to think positively."

"I am going to sleep. I do not think anything I can say is helpful." Thor lay down, and shortly afterwards, started to snore softly. Idis lay awake for a long time, listening to the geckos and the grasshoppers, and watching Thor sleep.

That night, she dreamt she was back in Eryn Arnen, in the front hall. She held a small baby in her arms: the baby's eyes were closed. Thor was standing on the stairs with her Uncle and Deorthric. "It was not to be," he said, and the baby disappeared. When she woke, her face was wet with tears.

After a week, Idis said to Thor one morning, "I think we should start duelling again."

Thor narrowed his eyes. "No. Not after what happened."

Idis shrugged. "I do not think that was the reason why I lost it. We stopped duelling well before then. And it is not as if we are doing anything at the moment which will lead to, well, any possibility of a child?"

Thor looked at her sidelong. "I shall leave it to you to decide when you are comfortable—?"

"The problem is—I do not know how to explain—"

Thor shrugged and got out of bed. "'Things must change for the better', that is what my Mama would say." Idis reflected that Thor's Mama was really quite irritating at times.

That afternoon, Nidhien told her the new batch of diplomats were coming in two days. Idis did not want them to come.

She and Thor had a meeting with Arahaelon.

"I have not heard anything about Khandians from my networks," Arahaelon said. "I do not know how we can help the Empress Mother. I am surprised she has not supplied more information. We suspect Chief Eunuch Bijaan manages far more extensive spy networks than we do. It is interesting that he is not involved—that suggests conflict?"

"When the new diplomats come, maybe they will have news for us?" said Idis.

Arahaelon grunted and took down the bottle of brandy and poured a small amount into three glasses. "Yes, Haldir and Cothion. I think you will like young Cothion; I hired him in the new intake. Let us toast their imminent arrival to the poisoned viper pit!"

"It is not quite that bad," said Thor. "No one has attempted to stab me yet, nor have I had to hit anyone with a chair leg. That is an improvement on the Minas Tirith office."

Idis sniffed the brandy. "Ooh. Dol Amroth brandy. This is a nice one." She took a small sip and the brandy burned all the way down.

Thor grimaced. "As long as it is not cheap Haradric resin wine." His face turned slightly paler and he gulped. "I recommend that you do not have it just after you have had bad Rohirric mead."

Idis and Arahaelon stared at him. "Why were you having those drinks at the same time?" said Arahaelon.

"It was Duinion's idea to have the mead. And after that, we did not really care what we had." Thor sipped the brandy. "Mmm, this is much nicer."

"I suppose this is before I knew you," said Idis. "I do not recall this."

Thor flushed. "No, actually, you were in Emyrn Arnen, and I was in Minas Tirith, awaiting news from you—about ... ?"

Idis looked at her husband. "O! You did not tell me you turned to drink!"

"Do I want to know more?" pondered Arahaelon.

"No!" Idis and Thor said at the same time.

Thor drained the glass. "Well, I should go back to looking at silk trade figures; Romdaer and I have a meeting with the silk merchants tomorrow. But thank you, Arahaelon, that brandy has given the snake pit a bit of a rosy glow."

Arahaelon laughed. "Unfortunately I am almost half way through the bottle. I hope Cothion and Haldir bring more."

After Thor left, Idis went to rise, but Arahaelon said gruffly, "My Lady, before you leave, are you well? I do not know much of these things but ... I have noticed since you were ... unwell ... that you seem very unhappy."

"I am finding it hard to see hope," said Idis, sitting back down and looking at her hands, her eyes watering. "Do not tell my parents."

"Surely your parents must have times of bleakness, given their family histories and the War—?"

Idis looked up. "Of course. But I feel bad for being upset because of the comparison. My father has not publicly shamed me for cowardice, and attempted to murder me, for example."

Arahaelon twisted his glass around and stared at the small amount of brandy in the bottom. "I think you are entitled to feel upset, Lady Idis." He sighed. "My lover of ten years left me just before I came back here. I am sad, for all that my father did not try to murder me."

Idis said, "Yes, you are entitled to be sad. I am very sorry to hear this." Once, when she had been pretending to be her brother Ecthelion, she had been approached by a pretty, waspish man who had professed to be living with Arahaelon. She wondered if he was the lover who had left; she had not really liked the man.

“Thank you.” Arahaelon paused. “Please keep that information private, even from your husband.”

Idis stood and bowed. “I am honoured that you trusted me.”

Then she left to help Nidhien plan the afternoon tea. She hoped to persuade the woman to have something other than the sticky cakes.

That evening when she got into bed with Thor, she said, “Really? Mead *and* resin wine?”

Thor looked sheepish and stared at the ceiling. “Yes. Half a bottle of each. It was a delayed reaction to the worst dinner party ever. Lúthien served horrible soup and raw-ish beef, and oh by *Ea*—the chewy squid tentacles, and the hard but soggy meringue. Meanwhile, my brother was *furious* with me, and my mother and Lúthien were so excited about our wedding, and would keep asking what colour we would wear.”

Idis could not help it: she laughed a very little bit. “How does one make meringue hard but soggy at the same time?”

“Lúthien has a special talent for making her cook prepare complex, disgusting food. I do not know why my brother is so portly, although I gather from what he told Papa and I that he gets the cook to make toasted sandwiches for an evening snack.” Then Thor’s eyes brightened. “Or maybe, just maybe, he stuffs pillows down his robes because he feels a judge must look portly?”

Idis laughed a little bit more. “You are serious?”

Thor rolled over to look at her. “Not *entirely*. But I am tempted to pat his stomach the next time I see him, just to make sure—”

“Can I be there when you do it?” said Idis.

“Of course!” Thor frowned and looked away. “As long as you have not decided to leave me, I suppose—”

Idis stared at him. “What are you talking about?”

Her husband’s face was closed. “Nothing.”

Idis sighed. “I am very sad, because I have lost something that I have discovered I very much wanted, and I fear that I will never have it. It is colouring everything.” She paused. “Why would you think I might leave you? I thought you might leave *me*—”

“I do not want to talk about it.” Thor turned his back on her. After a long silence he said, “Everyone thinks I am unworthy of you, given the difference in our rank. Maybe you do too?”

“I do not think that!” Idis was shocked. “I am not going to leave you! It is just that I am very sad, and you do not seem to want me to express sadness.”

Thor’s voice was muffled. “That is because I love thee. I do not seem to be able to fix it or make thee better, and everything I say makes it worse. I am a failure as a husband.”

"Nay, I am not a good wife; I fear I may never bear thy children. 'Tis thee who might leave me—" Idis started to cry. "And I love thee, my darling silly man who mixes wine and mead, and pats judge's stomachs to see if they are full of pillows."

Thor rolled back over and said, "I shall not leave thee. Never. Ever."

"I can only say the same back," said Idis, and they kissed. "I am not quite ready for—but I will be, in time," she explained.

"That is fine," said Thor. "I am happy to wait. Let me know when you are ready."

The next day, they waited in the courtyard for the new diplomats to arrive. The courtyard sweeping men arrayed themselves behind the official party, and Idis realised that they were as curious to see the new arrivals as she was. One of them came up to her and said, "We hope you are better now, Empress," then darted away. Idis regarded this as an improvement from prostration, so decided not to correct them on her title.

The two new diplomats walked into the courtyard looking hot and sweaty. Galador and Nidhien greeted them and they all went to the dining room. Idis had met Haldir back in Minas Tirith, but they had not met the new man, Cothion. To Idis's interest, he was a short man with brown eyes, plump cheeks and tanned skin, and looked at least partly Haradric.

"Everyone, Cothion is a new addition to our team," said Galador. "He is to take Thor's old position as Third Trade attaché." Idis wondered if the lack of rank was intentional or not.

She introduced herself to Cothion as they had afternoon tea, and the man laughed cheerfully. "I am afraid I have heard somewhat of you from dispatches from Baradir and Nallon. Is it true, my Lady, that you duel your husband?"

Thor and Idis looked at each other. "Maybe," said Thor and "Sometimes," said Idis at the same time.

"We must see!" said Haldir, leaning over eagerly. "We will feel deprived if we do not witness this, Thor. It is not fair if Baradir and Nallon saw it and we do not!"

Thor sighed. "Fine. Idis, we shall fight again. You get your wish."

Idis beamed and sipped her *café*. "Excellent. I look forward to winning our next bout."

Haldir suddenly straightened up. "Hold, we have a letter for you, Lady Idis. From your parents."

Idis took the letter from Haldir, but did not open it. "Thank you. I will read it later."

Later she said to Thor, "What happened to Sirion?"

Thor shrugged. "He probably quit the Harad office. A lot of people do." Then he said, "I suppose I should tell Farzad to be prepared for our duel in, say, two days' time? Are you sure you are physically up for this?"

Idis glared at Thor. "I am going to beat you and then you will see."



She retreated to their room, and was surprised to see that the letter was in her mother's precise and careful handwriting. Her father was the far more regular correspondent.

When Idis opened the letter, she was glad she had not done so in public. Éowyn said that she was extremely sad to hear Idis's news, and that no one would have told her Morwen's news had they realised. Then she said that she had spoken to the midwife at Emyn Arnen and Faramir had spoken to the midwife at Minas Tirith, and they had both said that miscarriages were common, and this miscarriage did not necessarily mean that Idis would have problems in the future. Idis wept both at the vision of her worried parents going out and seeking advice on her behalf, and that they had anticipated Idis's fear. "My next advice," wrote her mother, "is the same as I gave to your Aunt Loti nigh on six and thirty years ago. Do not worry overmuch about begetting a child; just try to enjoy each other's company." Idis was a little taken aback at this insight into the dynamics of her family's relationships, but decided that it must have worked, as her cousin Elfwine was thirty five and had several children of his own. Finally, her mother said that she loved Idis and that she hoped Thor was holding up well in difficult circumstances.

Her father had put a brief postscript on the letter. "Take care, Little Cat. Of course you are both sad, but time lessens the sting. All will be well. I love you. Daddy." Idis re-read her father's words several times and wondered first, whether her father had attempted to bend his will to read her and Thor's minds, and secondly, whether he had foreseen anything. It was most frustrating to have a father who could intermittently see things that others could not, particularly as he was very cagey about his abilities.

Then she went back to her desk. As she passed the courtyard, she heard Cothion speaking to one of the courtyard men, and noted that first, he spoke like a native Haradrim, and secondly, he had a south Haradric accent, almost Khandian accent. His name meant 'Son of the enemy' in Sindarin.

The next day she said to Cothion, who was now sitting at what she still thought of as 'Nallon's desk', "You speak Haradric well, my Lord?"

Cothion said nervously, "Aye, my Lady." He stiffened his shoulders and put up his chin. "I am no Lord. Although my mother is from Gondor, my father is a Haradric merchant."

Idis shrugged. "Well, I do not care, save that your skill in Haradric will be very useful. You must have done well in the public service exams." She brightened. "Say, you do not know about weaving patterns, do you?"

Bergon yawned. Cothion gave Bergon an uncertain look and said, "Alas, no, my Lady, I am afraid that is women's business."

As Thor walked past, Idis called to him and said, "Cothion speaks Haradric with a Southern accent. We can get him to purchase spices and see what prices he gets—?"

Thor smiled broadly. "Excellent. He will get far better prices than me, but will he get better prices than you?"

Haldir sighed. "Thor is conducting experiments *again*?"

"Idis and I came up with this one jointly," said Thor.

Cothion said, "How hard must I haggle?"

Thor said, "Haggle as hard as you can. That is what we do."

"I find the whole haggling thing boring," said Bergon. "Not that I go out into the market much, but if they name a price I just pay it." Cothion gave Bergon an incredulous look.

Idis said to Bergon, "If you need to get presents for your family, you tell me what you want and I shall get them for you."

Bergon shrugged. "But you could buy presents at any price, Idis?"

Idis shook her head. "It is not about the money, Bergon." Then she put her head on the side. "I suppose it is, but a more complicated way. I do not like people being ripped off."

Cothion said in Old Haradric, "Do not cast thy pearls before swine, lest they trample them." Thor's mouth twitched, and Idis looked down at her book.

"What was that about pearls?" said Haldir. "I did not know they sold pearls in Harad."

Arahaelon came out, and glared at Thor. "Enough chatter. We have a meeting."

Thor bowed. "Apologies, Lord Arahaelon. We were in fact discussing trading matters. But I shall come now."

Afterwards Cothion came past Idis's desk and muttered to her, "I did not expect anyone to understand that saying."

Idis laughed and said, "I warn you that my husband has read the old poets of the Haradrim and can probably recite sections to you."

Cothion narrowed his eyes. "Well, that is interesting. And you are reading a book on fencing techniques, my Lady?"

Idis blushed. "Shh. I might have asked one of my brothers to send it. I will go back to weaving patterns shortly."

On the day of the duel, Farzad had evidently excelled himself in promotion. The arena was packed by the time they got there. He looked at Idis anxiously. "You are well now, memsahib? You were sick?"

"I am quite well now," said Idis.

There was a tremendous cheer when they both went out onto the arena. Idis could see this took Thor aback as much as it did her.

They bowed to each other, and started the first round. Idis found it was cathartic, and some of her pain could be channelled into the fight. She won the first round reasonably quickly, and narrowed her eyes at her husband. "Do not go easy on me!"

Thor raised an eyebrow. "I am not. You are fighting very well today. But I shall win the next round."

Halfway through the next round the crowd suddenly went quiet. Neither she nor Thor noticed at first, as they were intent upon the fight, but the silence other than the clashing of swords became eerie.

Thor put up his hand. "Hold." Idis put up her sword.

They turned and saw that all of the Haradrim in the audience had prostrated themselves on the ground, some with great difficulty, and had moved to the sides of the arena, squashed into the stalls. The diplomats from Gondor were kneeling on the ground, heads down.

The reason for this was evident. The Emperor had just entered, dressed in a resplendent outfit of gold brocade, and two young slaves held a gold canopy over his head. His mother was with him, in the all-encompassing purple robe, only her eyes showing. They were accompanied by the tall fat beardless eunuch, several other eunuchs, and a retinue of slaves and armed soldiers.

"The Emperor, may he live forever, is incognito!" exclaimed the fat eunuch. "He does not require his miserable subjects to prostrate themselves."

Idis thought that the Emperor's attempts at being anonymous were markedly unsuccessful, but tried not to let this thought show in her expression.

The Emperor smiled at Idis and Thor. "Pray, do not cease fighting for me."

Thor looked at Idis doubtfully, and Idis shrugged. "We will do as the Emperor commands."

They bowed to each other, and started the fight again. At first they were both a little tentative, but then they got back into the rhythm of the fight. Idis found it was best if she pretended that the Emperor did not exist at all, and tried not to look in his direction. Finally Thor managed to back her into a corner, and touched her elbow with his sword. "First blood."

Then they paused and got their breath and wiped themselves down with wet towels, and went back for the final round. The arena was still eerily quiet, and Idis wished the Emperor would go away. From the roll of Thor's eye, he felt the same way.

Still, they bowed, and started the final round. Round and round the arena, they went, and back and forth, the only noise being the clash of swords, the sound of their boots on the sand, and their panting breath.

Idis pretended to get tired. She started to limp a little on her left foot, and drooped. She feinted, Thor pounced, and then she struck. "First blood."

Thor laughed, and let his sword point drop. "You caught me with my own trick!"

Idis looked smug. "Ha, revenge is mine! I am the winner."

Then they both sheathed their swords and went to shake hands. At that point, Arahaelon threw water over them, and Idis and Thor spluttered. "Argh!" said Idis.

The Emperor laughed and laughed and laughed. Everyone else started laughing and cheering too, as if some hidden permission had been given.

Thor hissed, "I only meant to shake hands, Arahaelon! Not embrace her!"

Arahaelon shrugged, and gave them a half-smile.

"Well," said the Emperor. "That was one of the most entertaining things I have seen in a long time."

Then he clicked his fingers and the tall fat man said, "The Celestial Emperor, uniter of the Emirates, may he live forever, is now leaving."

Idis, Thor and Arahaelon all bowed deeply, and the Haradrim got back on the floor. The Imperial retinue left, and then everyone got back up again.

Thor looked at Idis. "Well done again, my love."

Idis blew him a kiss. "I told you I would win."

Farzad came up with wide eyes. "Sahib, memsahib, I do not know what to say. I will not be able to sweep that section of my arena on which the Celestial Emperor, may he live forever, stood. This is one of the most amazing days of my life. I thank you for it."

Idis said, "Maybe you could sweep up the sand upon which the Emperor, um, may he live forever, stood and put it in a bottle so that space is usable? It seems awkward otherwise."

Farzad said, "Memsahib, you are very practical."

Thor laughed and said, "Yes, she is. I am sorry, we cannot stay for apple tea and biscuits today." He picked at his dripping jerkin. "We are very wet. I think Arahaelon threw more water than last time."

"Maybe next time. Farewell sahibs and memsahib," said Farzad.

Thor and Idis wrapped themselves up in their covering garments, and they all set out back for the Embassy.

"Does that usually happen?" said Haldir.

"No," said Arahaelon sardonically. "The Emperor does not usually turn up unexpectedly at fight arenas in the lower half of the City. He must have had a whim to see the fight."

Romdaer laughed. "This could only happen to Thorongil and Idis! I am just surprised that there were no assassins?"

Thor rolled his eyes. "I have had enough of them to last a lifetime. Please, no more."

When they got back to the Embassy, Galador and Nidhien were bickering in the courtyard. They turned and looked at the returning group. Nidhien's eyebrows rose as Idis shrugged off the black cover and wrung out her braid onto the courtyard. The dark wet patches of water shrank swiftly in the hot Haradric sun.

"Thor and Idis got wet again?" said Nidhien.

Thor glared at Arahaelon. "Arahaelon decided to entertain the Emperor by throwing water over us."

Romdaer laughed. "It worked. The Emperor was amused."

Idis said, "Personally I think Arahaelon looks for excuses to soak us."

Galador said, "Wait! Did you just say ... the Emperor?"

Arahaelon sighed. "We will brief you, Ambassador. This outing was unexpected."

"We will return shortly. I am soaked to the skin and must change," said Idis. "But the taste of victory is still sweet."

When they got back to their room, Idis began to strip off her clothing and said, "The Emperor is a brat, I say again. Who comes along without warning and makes everyone grovel like that? I mean, at least when Aragorn goes incognito, he wears that stupid cloak and smokes that horrible pipe, and makes some attempt to to look anonymous."

"The current Emperor is better than that Emperor who randomly impaled people he did not like. Or the Empress Roxelana, who gouged out her own son's eyes rather than letting him rule, and took the throne from him." Thor stopped with his trousers halfway off. "Wait. Does our King go to public houses in Minas Tirith and look foreboding in corners?"

"You did not realise it was him, that time at the Eagle and Star? I thought *everyone* knew that."

Thor coloured. "I was drunk. And, O no, I may have waxed lyrical about you to Mistor, and I am sure he was listening in, and he told me to pursue the woman of my dreams and tell her that I loved her—"

Idis laughed as she put on her dress. "Uncle Aragorn *loves* a romantic story!"

"But I thought the original Thorongil was dead!" said Thor. "Killed before the War of the Ring?"

Idis shook her head. "Not at all. Aragorn just—dropped that identity. The grandfather whom I do not name did not like the Aragorn-as-Thorongil, not at all, you see."

When they got back to the office, Thor was still muttering to himself. "What is wrong with him?" said Haldir. "Sore loser? Or upset about being wet?"

"No," said Idis. "I have enlightened him that King Elessar sometimes goes incognito, evidently more effectively than the Emperor."

"You mean how the King goes to the Eagle and Star?" said Haldir. "Who does not know that?"

"Actually, even I know that," said Cothion, with surprise.

Thor glared at Haldir and Cothion. "I shall suggest to the King that he must have servants hold a golden canopy over his head when he is incognito, in order to assist people like me." Then he stalked off.

"He really did not realise?" said Bergon.

Idis giggled and shook her head. "They had a conversation. I cannot wait to hear the King's version of what Thor said."

Haldir hit his forehead with his palm. "That is typical of Thor: to talk to the King, and not realise it." Then he laughed. "At least Thor would always be polite, regardless of who it was—?"

"Without a doubt," said Idis. "When the King heard we were engaged, he offered to officiate our wedding, so I am guessing Thor accidentally charmed him somehow."

"He is so nonchalant: 'O, yes, I was attacked by assassins and poisoned, and did I forget to tell you that I just married a Princess I met in a Salon—?'" said Bergon.

"Actually we met in the Great Archives, and I am not a princess."

Bergon waved his hand. "These are small details—"

Cothion said in a small voice, "Lady Idis, where did you and Lord Thorongil learn to fight like that?"

Idis said, "Thor was in the Army for seven years and says he had nothing better to do than teach himself Haradric and duel other men in his regiment. My mother taught me—"

Cothion's mouth dropped open. "Your *mother*?"

"Yes, as I have told the others, she was a shield maiden of Rohan before she wed my father." Idis looked at the worried young man. "You were not in the Army?"

"No, I took the public service exam, after graduating from the King's School in Minas Tirith."

"You must be highly intelligent. The public service exam is challenging," said Idis, and Cothion blushed.

Bergon frowned. "Wait, did you sit the exam, Lady Idis?"

"I am in the public service, am I not? If normal people had to sit it, I thought I ought to. The King gave me a special dispensation." Idis crossed her arms. "Once I sat it, I found that there was one person in the last ten years who had beaten my score, so I had to find out who he was."

Haldir said, "What did you do when you found him? Did you *kill* him?"

Idis beamed. "No, I married him."

Bergon gaped. "*Thor*?"

Thor wandered out. "Did someone call me?"

Bergon said, "You did not tell us that you had the top result in the public service exams in the last ten years, Thor!"

Thor shrugged. "Did I? I suppose it is because I quite enjoy tests and reading, and have a very good memory for that kind of thing. I was just happy to get a position at all, to be frank. Did you need me for anything, Bergon?"

"No, not really," said Bergon faintly. "I just cannot believe the things that you know and do not know, Thor."

"O, people are much harder to understand than exams and books," said Thor. "Anyway, Cothion, do you want to come to this afternoon's meeting with the Ministry of Trade on export of plate glass? You can take notes. I will brief you as we go down there."

The next morning, Arahaelon called Idis into his office. "You do not happen to know who Lady 'Mystery' is, do you? The guards at the front gate were given a note, and they have passed it on to me."

Idis coloured. "It is me. I could not think of anything better on the spot."

Arahaelon handed her a note. It simply read, *Lady Mystery, come to the place where we last met.*

Idis said, "This is from Romdaer's former mistress, I think. I shall see her this morning and report back."

She went to Thor. "I am just going into town. I will speak when I get back." Then she wrapped herself in the hot, prickly black cloak and headed down to Soraiya's house.

When she got there, the same slave was at the entrance. He bowed and said, "Lady Mystery?"

"Yes, I am here to see your mistress."

The slave took her upstairs and back into the room where she had seen Soraiya last time. Soraiya was waiting on a divan, reading a book. She looked up and smiled. "Ah! You got my note."

Idis took off the black cloak and said, "Yes, I did."

"Get *café* and cakes for us," said Soraiya to the slave, signalling that Idis was welcomed as a guest. Idis relaxed and sat.

"I understand that the Emperor, may he live forever, came to your duel yesterday?" said Soraiya.

Idis saw no point in denying that she was one of the participants. "Yes. It was most unexpected. I do not know how the Emperor would have heard about it—"

Soraiya laughed. "It has been the talk of the town: the mad foreign couple who fight, and I knew of only one woman who might be the combatant." Then she frowned. "All were concerned when you were unwell. I thought not to contact you until I heard you were back. You are better now?"

Idis kept her mouth firm. "I am well."

Soraiya said, "Hah! You do not lie well, woman of Gondor. Most interesting."

"The full truth? I am physically recovered now," said Idis. "I suffered a ... bereavement ... of sorts." She looked away to hide the fact that her eyes were watering.

Soraiya nodded. "I am sorry to hear it."

“Thank you. In any case, was there something specific you wished to raise with me?”

Soraiya put her finger to her chin. “There has been talk that the Empress Mother has formed a friendship with a woman of high status from Gondor; the Ambassador’s wife, I am presuming. Do you know this woman?”

Idis tried to keep her face still. “I may.”

“I need to know if you can get a message to the Empress Mother, Lady ‘Mystery’.” Soraiya lowered her voice and looked defensive. “I am a courtesan, but I am still a loyal subject of Harad.”

Idis sipped her *café* and said, “You kept your bargain with me and have been hospitable. We all make our way in this world as best we can, Soraiya Hatun, and I do not look down upon you. I can get your message to the Empress Mother, one way or another.”

Soraiya looked down at her cup. “It may be that I share a pillow sometimes with a man from Khand, a rich Khan who seeks preferment. From what this man tells me, they fight each other all the time.”

“Sometimes they seek also to destabilise other nations.” Idis paused and showed her teeth. “The last Khandians who tried this in Gondor did not live long enough to regret it.”

Soraiya threw back her head and laughed. “My initial instinct was right. You are an assassin, are you not? You and the lover with whom you fight are assassins, posing as a married couple?”

Idis shrugged. “It is more that my family has a mandate to protect and defend Gondor. And if, as part of that mandate, I am required to help Harad remain stable, I will. It is not in Gondor’s interests for Harad to fall into chaos.”

Soraiya said, “Well. I think I have found the right woman, then. The man from Khand told me of a plot against the Emperor, may he live forever. The Khan was drunk and had taken drugs at the time. And I do not want chaos either, any more than you do. The Emperor has no children, and no living brothers—”

Idis nodded. “We are on the same page then. Tell me of the plot.” She frowned. “Assassins, poison, or both?”

“A new kind of poison,” said Soraiya. “I do not know the details. One of the plotters is a spice merchant travelling through Qarshoom, in the south. That is all I know.”

Idis sat up. She and Thor had planned to see the head of the *café* guild in Qarshoom, but it looked like their trip would be expedited. “I will ensure this is communicated to the Empress Mother. And I will do whatever I can to stop them succeeding. Thank you for trusting me.”

Soraiya said, “Thank you, Hatun.” They kissed each other on each cheek as Idis left.

Idis hurried back to the Embassy, and fetched her husband, then they went to Arahaelon’s office. Idis swiftly explained what had occurred in her meeting with Soraiya.

She had not gotten very far when Thor sat forward, his eyebrows lowered. “You went alone?”



"I was not unarmed!" Idis ground her teeth. "Had I thought there was danger, I would have taken you, but I made the judgement that this woman would do me no harm, which was correct."

Arahaelon shook his head and looked at the ceiling with a sour expression. "May the Valar save me from emotionally entangled operatives in future."

Idis put her head on the side. "I am afraid that you are stuck with us, Lord Arahaelon. In any case, I think we are going to have to go to Qarshoom." She finished explaining.

"At least we have a pretext to go to Qarshoom," said Thor. "I shall write to the head of the *café* guild, Asherbani Khan, and ask if we can speak to him. I was already planning to meet him."

Arahaelon leaned back. "Can you bring Cothion in to discuss Qarshoom, Thor? His father is from Southern Harad."

While her husband was gone, Arahaelon said, "Thor means well."

"I know," said Idis, looking down at her hands.

Thor came back with the young diplomat. "We are going to Qarshoom. We need your guidance. We wish to see the head of the *café* guild."

"Ah! My father used to be part of that guild when he was very young! Of course, he has moved out of *café* and into facilitating Haradric trade in Minas Tirith." Cothion frowned. "They're very conservative in that area of the world. That is why Baba left: he could not stand it."

"Does he know Asherbani Khan?" said Thor.

"O, that old spider made it to the centre of the web?" said Cothion with interest. "I was going to tell you to use my father's name to open doors, but I think now it is probably better not to."

"My name will be enough," said Thor. "I have met Asherbani Khan during my last season in Harad. He is a canny man."

Cothion looked thoughtful. "So, what can I tell you? Women must cover themselves, and sometimes men in that area of Harad have multiple wives." Then he coloured. "Baba once tried to persuade Mama that he should have a second wife. My mother hit him over the head with a wooden spoon, repeatedly."

Idis laughed delightedly, and clapped. "She is not from Rohan, is she? She sounds like my mother, although Mummy would probably use something sharper than a spoon—"

"No, she was born in Minas Tirith." Cothion paused. "That is another point: spoons make me think of cutlery. They eat with their right hand down there. Do *not* eat with your left hand!"

Thor squinted. "What is wrong with the left hand?"

"It is the hand people use to, er, wipe themselves after the toilet," said Cothion with embarrassment.

"How do I eat with my hand?" said Idis.

Cothion said, "I will train you at meals. There is a knack to it. You will also have to sit on cushions and if Lady Idis is allowed to attend, she will have to sit with the women, who may be veiled or behind a screen." Then he paused. "Men speak to men, and women speak to women, but it is improper for a man who is not married to a particular woman to talk to her, and *vice versa*."

Thor blinked. "May I ask you to write all this down for us?"

Arahaelon said, "What do you intend to tell the Khan in this meeting, Thor?"

Thor ticked off points on his fingers. "That Khand tried to flood the Gondor market with their *café* and make a profit by passing it off as Haradric, that Khand was insane enough to send assassins to kill people for trying to expose it, that the King and the Prince Steward know, and that Gondor leaves it to Khand and Harad to sort out, but is happy to share information with Harad."

Arahaelon nodded. "That sounds fair."

Idis bared her teeth. "Can I tell them that I killed a Khandian assassins?"

Cothion stared at her. "You did?"

Idis looked Cothion in the eye. "They killed an old man and a messenger, and then they tried to kill Thor, so I killed one to defend him. I only kill in self defence or to defend others." She shook her head. "They were most cowardly."

Arahaelon laughed. "If the topic comes up in conversation you may politely infer that you may have had a hand in their deaths, my Lady. I think that will put the cat among the pigeons. In any case, I must prepare for my next meeting, but thank you all."

As they walked back to their desks, Idis asked Cothion curiously, "How did people react when your mother married your father?"

Cothion blushed deeply. "My father's parents call her the hussy of Gondor. My mother's parents disowned her for marrying a 'swarthy man'."

Idis grimaced. "Ah. I am sorry to hear it. Cross-cultural marriages can be difficult. There is no way my father would have been allowed to marry my mother had my paternal grandfather still been alive. The Rohirrim seem to have been more accepting—"

Thor shrugged. "From what your father told me, he banked on the fact that everyone else was at the Fields of Cormallen when he proposed to your mother, and it was too late for your uncle to object, particularly given the fact the King immediately communicated his approval."

Idis laughed. "O, my dear Father. Always so strategic!"

"It might impress Asherbani if you tell him your mother is from Rohan, Lady Idis. They have heard stories of the insane horse riders with the straw-coloured hair." Cothion paused. "Do you ever feel like you do not fit in any world, Lady Idis?"

"All the time," said Idis. "When my brother spent a year at the King's School in Minas Tirith, some of the boys called him Rohirric Half-Breed."

Cothion's jaw dropped. "I thought that only happened to ... well ... people like me, not Lords and Ladies?"

Idis laughed. "My brother did not tell anyone who our parents were, because he wanted to be accepted on his own merits. Then he broke some boy's ribs in a rage after the boy tried to beat him up, and it became evident who he was when Mother turned up to check up he was not hurt—"

"I have always wondered what it would be like to look Númenórean," said Cothion.

Thor sighed and patted his hair. "I wonder this too. I have also been called 'half-breed', by my mother's family, and 'changeling' by the boys in the village."

Idis shrugged. "My father looks as Númenórean and noble as you can get, because he is. However, his mother died when he was small and his father despised him. His life was not at all easy until he met my mother. Looking Númenórean did not help him. The love of one's parents cannot be over-valued."

Cothion looked away and his voice cracked with emotion. "I have always been a little ... ashamed ... of my parents. Now I feel bad."

Thor laughed. "Your mother is not insanely enthusiastic about your every success, is she?"

Cothion recovered himself. "*Both* of them are! It is lovely, but so embarrassing."

Idis's eyes widened. "Two of your mother, dear Thor, that is just too much to imagine."

Thor gave her an odd look, but simply said, "I prefer not to envisage it. Well, this was all very interesting. I shall await our classes on eating in the evening."

The entire Embassy enjoyed watching Cothion attempt to teach Idis and Thor to eat with their hands at the evening meal. "You must scoop it more, thus—" he said.

Idis said, "O no, I have dropped rice in my lap. I must get better before we go to Qarshoom." She brushed it off.

Thor laughed. "I am glad that there is one thing in the world that Idis does not pick up effortlessly upon her first try." Indeed, he had spilled less rice than her.

"It is easier if you have flat bread," said Cothion to Idis. "The kitchen has promised to make some tomorrow."

When they went back to their room after dinner, Idis said, "I really like this new man, Cothion."

"Yes, he is a breath of fresh air: competent and pleasant," said Thor. "I enjoyed our conversation after the meeting with Arahaelon."

"You gave me a strange look at the end. Why was that?"

Thor looked away. "You called me 'dear Thor'. I have really missed you calling me that."

“O! Well, in that case, I shall have to try it again.” Idis paused. “Dear Thor, please take off thy clothing and get into bed with me—”

Thor turned back to her and stared. “Gladly, but you are sure you are ready—?”

For an answer, Idis pulled off her own dress and smallclothes, then started to undo his trousers. They kissed, and were both suddenly consumed by urgent passion, reminding Idis of the time when she had gone to Thor’s room in Emyrn Arnen before they were married. As he entered her, she said, “More, faster, please,” and he complied until they were both gasping and clutching each other.

Once they had gained their breath again, Thor said, “Sorry, I did not manage to take off my shirt.”

Idis laughed. “I will forgive thee,” she said gravely.

Her husband leaned down and kissed her. “Dear Idis.”

She slept more easily that night than she had in some time. They both woke again in the early hours before dawn, and made love again more slowly, and then fell asleep.

Idis was startled to be woken by her maid Feriadis touching her shoulder gently.

Feriadis whispered, with a grin, “I am sorry to wake you, my Lady, but you will sleep in otherwise.”

Feriadis crept back out, and Idis saw that the sun was indeed high (the day was already heating up) and that her and Thor’s clothes had been strewn all over the bedroom. She woke her husband and they got ready for the day.

They spent the morning getting ready to go to Qarshoom. Apparently the best animal for the sandy roads there was an animal called a *camel*. Idis thought that they looked far less attractive and much more bad-tempered than horses, but was excited by the prospect of riding an animal that no one else in her family had ridden. Someone was willing to take them out there the next day. Meanwhile Feriadis and Tirien drew straws as to who went. Tirien was the unlucky maid, and Feriadis crowed while packing that she did not have to ride a camel. Then they heard shouting outside in the courtyard.

Idis went out into the courtyard to discover that Cothion was arguing with a plump, dark-skinned bearded man wearing a bright green *djellaba*. The man was complaining loudly in a Southern accent about his cousin and his uncle and the difficulty in getting adequate shipping to Pelargir, and waving his arms.

“Go away!” said Cothion in Haradric. “Just go away! Talk to Baba or Castamir about it.”

The man huffed. “Cothion, I am just asking you a small favour—how often do I ask you favours?”

Idis came up quietly behind them and said in Haradric to the green-clad man, “I am not quite sure who you are, sir, but you are upsetting Cothion. I advise you to stop.”

Both men jumped at least a hand’s breath in the air: Idis had not meant to startle them that badly.

Cothion flushed dark red. “Berhooz, look what you have done! Idis Hatun, this is my cousin Berhooz; Berhooz, this is Idis Hatun.”

Berhooz said, with innocent brown eyes wide, "I am just asking my cousin a favour—"

Idis crossed her arms, and looked down at the man. "I will escort you from these premises if you do not leave Cothion alone."

Cothion said, "Please, Berhooz, leave now; this woman fights with swords and kills assassins—"

Thor sauntered towards them. "Hullo Thor," Idis said in Westron to her husband.

"O, great," muttered Cothion, also in Westron.

Thor smiled gently and spoke in Haradric. "Peace, gentlemen and my dearest wife. What seems to be the problem here?"

Cothion looked like he wanted to die. "Thorongil Khan, this is my cousin, Berhooz; Berhooz, this is Thorongil Khan. Berhooz wants to talk with me about ships to Pelargir, and I want him to go away."

Thor frowned. "What if I have a list of ships which will go from Beyazim to Pelargir in the next week? Would that help?"

Berhooz said, "Thank you, kind Khan of Gondor. Yes, that might help me find space for my cargo."

Thor wandered off, and Cothion said, "Berhooz, Thorongil Khan is my master. I am trying to make a good impression and you are not helping. Do not think you can try this again."

Berhooz's eyes widened, and he glanced at Idis. "I do not know why you think I will—"

"It is sad experience. What about the time you—?" said Cothion, but broke off as Thor came back.

Thor handed over a piece of paper with a list on it. As Berhooz gave thanks, Thor said, "I have to say that if I was Cothion's father I might not want to give you free freight either, notwithstanding the fact that you are family. But maybe I misunderstood? I am not entirely fluent." Idis snorted. Thor ignored her, and continued, "Also, please do not bother your cousin about this kind of matter again, as my wife can be over-protective, and might escort you out at knifepoint. May peace follow you, as it surely will, as long as you do not annoy your cousin Cothion again."

Cothion escorted a somewhat shamefaced Berhooz out. While he was gone, Idis switched back to Westron. "Thor, I do not think I have ever seen your diplomacy in action before. That was superb. You stopped the fight and ensured he will not come back, all very gently."

"Yes, my love. I think we shall use this model on Asherbani Khan. You shall be fierce and I shall be reasonable and deceptively vague. It worked a treat."

Cothion came back shaking his head. "I am very, very sorry about that. He is so annoying. Apparently Baba called him a leech, and I am inclined to agree with him—"

"Everyone has insane relatives," said Idis. "It cannot be helped."

"She knows of what she speaks. At our wedding, Idis's uncle threatened me in a very friendly, jolly way and his body guards threatened to tattoo me," said Thor. "And then on the other side, her

father's cousin enjoys exploding things for fun, eating raw *café* beans and unsuccessfully attempting to breed giant spiders."

"Your family sounds even odder than mine, my Lady." Cothion paused. "Pray, why does your uncle need bodyguards?"

"It comes with being the King of Rohan, of course," said Idis. "Although we have all needed them at different times."

"Even I had them at one point, before we married," said Thor.

"That is when you ought to have known my intentions towards you were extremely serious—" said Idis, and then noticed that Cothion was doing an excellent impression of a fish out of water. She sighed. "Not this again! Did Haldir not tell you? I thought you realised from what I said about Mummy and Daddy earlier. Let us get this over quickly: my mother is Lady Éowyn, formerly of Rohan, my father is Prince Faramir, also Steward of Gondor. I thought you knew."

"Haldir just said you were of the House of Húrin—" said Cothion faintly. "I did not know what that meant and was too embarrassed to ask."

"If you prostrate yourself on the ground, Idis might stab you," warned Thor. "She threatened to cut me up with a butter knife after I bowed formally to her."

"It was not the bow that annoyed me," Idis informed him stiffly. "It was the fact that you did not think you were good enough to sit at a table with me."

Cothion said, "But my mother was a Minas Tirith barmaid and my Baba is a trader from a small South Haradric village."

"That's nice. My Papa has a farming estate in Lossarnach, and is obsessed by crop rotation and pig feed," said Thor. "Mama has been married twice, the first time to a merchant, the second time to my Papa. We think my oldest half-brother stuffs pillows down his top to look important."

"Thor and I are both fifth children. I hope you are too, Cothion? That would be a nice coincidence," said Idis.

Cothion stared at them. "Sadly, I am the third child and the second son. My family is very large."

Idis laughed. "There are ten children in my family. How many are there in yours?"

Cothion said, "There are twelve of us still living."

Idis narrowed her eyes. "It sounds like your parents have a lot in common with mine: a marriage across cultures, strange relatives and many children. I almost think they ought to meet."

Cothion shook his head. "I do not want to imagine that!"

"Idis's parents are surprisingly human," said Thor. "In some ways, I find them easier to get along with than my own parents. But we need to get back to preparing for our journey, Idis—"

Idis was quite excited about the prospect of the journey to Qarshoom. She was looking forward to getting away from her colleagues and seeing other parts of Harad. She liked Haldir well enough—he was quiet and solemn—but she feared she was going to scream at Bergon if she had to sit facing him another day. He was always snooping into what she was doing.

The next day, she and Thor rose early and clad themselves in travelling clothes and girded themselves with their swords. Idis put the brown and gold scarf loosely around her head. Two of the men who guarded the gates of the Embassy were coming along, as well as Tirien. Idis had gotten her maids to pack a strange assortment of garb, including the black cover-all, the glittery black and gold outfit Aunt Nilofar had given her as a wedding gift, her travelling clothing and a formal dress in the style of Gondor. She had decided not to pack jewellery other than what she wore on her person: it presented too much of a risk.

They made their way through the bustling, smelly loud City. Arahaelon, Romdaer and Cothion accompanied them, but the Ambassador was conspicuous by his absence. Idis wondered what the man actually did. As they walked, to Idis's surprise, people stared at her and Thor with awe, and several street vendors called out, "Are you fighting again today?"

"Not today," said Thor, waving.

They met the cameleer outside Beyazim at one of the oases, a dark-skinned, white turbaned man wearing a matching white djellaba. His eyes widened as he looked at Idis and Thor and the swords girt at their sides. "I am transporting the famous sword-fighting couple of Gondor?"

Thor said to Idis, "I did not realise we had this reputation. I suppose we do not leave the Embassy much except for official meetings."

"I shall have to think how we can leverage this more effectively," said Romdaer, thoughtfully.

They went to their camels. The camels bore large leather saddles with woven red and blue tassels all over them. Idis's camel looked at her with apparent hatred in its large, black, long-lashed eyes, and to Idis's surprise spat at her. She wiped the green goo off her dress with a handkerchief, while the cameleer hit the camel's rump with a stick. "Bad beast! No spitting!" They mounted the camels, and poor Tirien screamed as her camel stood in stages. Idis did not entirely blame her; it was very different to riding a horse. Flies buzzed around them, and Idis's camel spat at a fly with astounding accuracy.

At first, in the early morning, it was quite pleasant. They passed small villages, nestled around tiny trickling rivers, with green irrigated fields stretching out in delicate patchwork around them. But as the day heated up and they got into more barren areas, it became unpleasant. The landscape looked as desolate as the moon: great, grey brown sand-hills and large black rocks. Idis began to understand how the tradition of veiling had arisen as she pulled her scarf over the lower part of her face; it kept the flies away and the sand out of her mouth. The cameleer came over and spoke to Thor. "You need a turban, sahib. Your skin is already looking burned."

They stopped and Idis got a spare scarf out of her pack and gave it to her husband. It was a lovely dark red colour with silver embroidered flowers. "You look beautiful, darling. It matches the colour of the back of your neck."

"Haha, very funny," said Thor, looking uncomfortable and hot.

"You should get a turban in Qarshoom," said the cameleer, sympathetically, but his mouth twitched.

By the end of the day, Idis was exhausted, hot, and also slightly sunburned where the scarf had not quite covered her forehead. Her backside hurt with the unfamiliar movement of the camel. She was extremely relieved when they stopped at a small town near an oasis. "Argh!" said Tirien. "I can barely walk."

The cameleer took the camels to the little lake and they all dismounted and let their animals drink. Idis's camel decided to thank her by spitting at her again, but she was ready for this, and dodged more effectively this time.

The cameleer and his men set up a camp outside the town, and Idis and Tirien sat down gratefully on a blanket they spread on the ground under the shade of a palm tree. Then they saw that small children with big dark eyes were watching them from behind another palm tree.

"Northern barbarian women!" the children exclaimed excitedly.

"What are they saying?" asked Tirien, stretching.

"They are noting that we are foreign women," said Idis. "There is no malice in it, just curiosity." She waved at the children, and spoke to them in Haradric. "Peace, children. We are women of Gondor—" The children dashed away, shrieking.

"O dear," said Tirien. "What did you say?"

"I greeted them and said we were from Gondor," said Idis. "But I think they were shocked that I could speak to them." She shrugged. "I have received a similar reaction in very rural parts of Rohan at times."

The cameleer and his men made a meal of rice and dried meat. It was oddly spiced but tasty. Then they set up skin tents with speed and evident practice. It became amazingly cold once the sun set, and Idis snuggled up close to Thor and fell asleep quickly.

The next day they rode through hot, baked moonscapes, with giant mounds of yellow earth and blue grey rocks. Luckily for Thor, most of his sunburn from the day before had faded, apart from the burn on the back of his neck.

On the third day, they reached a place with large twisted rocks, upon which grey-green bushes clung desperately. Several large black raptors of some kind hung in the deep blue sky above, watching for prey.

Eventually, in the late afternoon, Idis saw a large sprawling town in the distance, with several tall minarets standing up into the sky like fingers, and beyond that, the sea. "There is Qarshoom," said the cameleer. It was evident that the guards at the gates recognised the cameleer and his men, but they stopped Idis and Thor and their retinue.

Thor showed them his official letter of introduction, and they waved him through, with looks askance at Idis. The town had dirt roads and was set on a wide, flat shallow river which ran down into the sea. The houses were made of brown adobe mud brick, with curved domes. The cameleer took them to the inn Romdaer had recommended; it looked to be an old mansion or temple adapted into an inn, with the ubiquitous inner courtyard. They had reserved several rooms. The innkeeper



greeted them courteously, and took Thor and Idis up to a spacious room with brightly coloured weavings and large bronze candelabras. He then told them there were several rooms with large baths in them on the ground floor. Tirien helped them unpack their bags, and said that her room on the first floor was quite comfortable, albeit not nearly as large.

Idis and Thor went to the baths separately. Idis felt a lot better for getting the sand and dust and camel sweat off her. She came back up and found her husband had fallen asleep fully clothed on the bed while waiting for her. She looked out over the city: the setting sun painted the ocean in stripes of red, gold and pink. Then she lay down on the bed next to Thor and fell asleep too. They were woken by knocking: the room was now dark, and an anxious servant wanted to know if they wanted meat and rice for dinner. He lit their lanterns, and then came back up with delicious spiced poultry dish on rice and sultanas, accompanied by flat bread and apple tea. Idis was now getting a lot better at eating with her right hand. Then they discussed how they would proceed tomorrow: Thor would handle Asherbani, and Idis would handle the information about the merchant.

The next morning dawned bright and hot. Idis ate the sticky dates, astringent milky drink and hard cheese provided for breakfast, although it was not much to her taste as a breakfast meal. Then Thor wrote a letter to Asherbani telling him they had arrived, and they walked around the city together. Idis wore her split skirts and a plain head scarf. Evidently it was rather unusual for a woman to bear a sword in public; in any case, Idis got a lot of stares which she ignored. She marked the position of the spice stalls for later, and they walked down to the docks to look at the ships being loaded. To her utter delight, a mûmak with sawn off tusks was pulling logs off a ship. She watched with pleasure as the mûmak lifted up a log and placed it carefully on a waggon on the pier with its trunk. A man with pale brown skin and black almond-shaped eyes rode on the back of the mûmak and seemed to direct it by gently touching it with a long stick. After a while, the man let the mûmak take a drink and then dismounted from it on a specially made stand with steps. He looked at her and Thor.

"You never seen a mûmak before, Northerners?" he said in a strange accent.

"I have, but I am not sure my wife has," said Thor, and then looked at Idis.

"No, I have not seen a live one before. I have heard tell of them," said Idis with shining eyes. Her father and others in her family had told her of facing mûmakil during the War of the Ring, but she did not think she would share that information with the man.

The man clicked his tongue and the mûmak came over. "Binah, greet the Northerners," said the man. The mûmak huffed and ran its flexible trunk gently over them both, sniffing their faces.

Thor reached out and gently patted the mûmak's trunk, and the mûmak came closer and huffed at him again. Idis tentatively patted her a little too. The skin was warm, but wrinkled and tough, almost like parchment. The mûmak's trunk was not all grey, but a little pink and freckled with grey spots.

"Binah likes you," said the man. "But we must get back to work. I hope peace follows you."

"Thank you," said Idis. "We wish you and Binah peace as well."

As they walked back to their inn, Idis said, "What do you think it would be like to ride a mûmak?"

Thor looked at her. "No, Idis."

When they returned to their room, Idis said, "It is necessary in my role of Cultural Attaché to ride a mûmak. How can I understand Haradric culture without riding one?"

Thor laughed. "You can understand Haradric culture quite well without riding a mûmak, darling." Then he opened the letter from Asherbani. "We are to visit Asherbani Khan tomorrow evening. Apparently his two wives will also be present. He has asked you to wear a veil."

"I will wear Aunt Nilofar's outfit." Idis paused. "Should I speak Haradric or not?"

Thor shrugged. "I would not disclose it immediately, but if the wives will not speak to me—it will have to be you." Then he smiled. "We can talk in Westron first, and then disclose that you understand Haradric."

Idis said, "That will unsettle him."

"Precisely," said Thor. "I think we might get more out of him that way."

Idis looked out at the bustling town through the window. "What do we do now? I do not think I have enough time to buy spices before lunch."

Thor came up behind her, and put his arms around her. "I have an idea—"

She turned around and looked him in the eyes. "I like your idea—I was too tired last night, but I was regretting that as I fell asleep—"

"I might have had dreamt about it," said her husband, and drew her over to the bed.

"Well, you shall have to show me what you dreamt about," said Idis, and he did, to her satisfaction.

Afterwards they lay drowsily on the bed, and Thor said, "Something about this reminds me of our honeymoon. A break from work—although it is not really—and away from everyone else."

"It is really good to get away from Bergon," said Idis. "If I had to stare at his face for another day I might punch him."

Thor laughed. "I thought you were a neutral party in the Thor-Bergon conflict?"

"Ah but there is also a separate Idis-Bergon conflict, which has arisen regardless of your conflict, because Bergon is an idiot. That is why I must be careful. Also I am very cognisant that I outrank everyone socially and most of the Embassy professionally, apart from Romdaer, Arahaelon and Galador."

"Everyone wants Bergon to go home," said Thor.

"Bergon wants Bergon to go home most of all," said Idis. "What is his social rank anyway?"

Thor shrugged. "Not so different from mine, but with a touch of my brother Denethor: mix of merchant on his mother's side and minor gentry on his father's. He is serving time before he goes home to Pelargir and uses his knowledge to set up a trading house."

Then they got up and clad themselves so that the anxious servant was not shocked when he brought up lunch.

After lunch, Idis went downstairs holding a hessian bag. In the back alley behind the inn, she opened the bag, put on her black coverall, and left the bag neatly folded at the back of the alley. She did not want anyone associating Lady Idis with the person she was about to become. She went out onto the street. She was far from the only black-garbed woman, although others were dressed in similarly covering garments of blue or beige.

She noticed as she walked the markets that several people were staring at her with extreme suspicion, and she wondered why. She thought no one could associate her with Lady Idis, although she did stand head and shoulders above anyone else. She went up to a vegetable stall and said, "What is this fruit here?"

The stall owner looked at her and said a name curtly: it sounded like "Bitter-melon." She repeated the name, and several of the women also standing at the stall looked at her with wide brown eyes behind their veils.

As she left the stall, she heard the stall owner say audibly to one of the women, "Stinking Horondorim." Then she realised: she had been identified as Northern Haradric by her height, accent and eyes. Her Aunt Nilofar had spoken extremely dismissively of the Southern Haradrim, calling them "yokels with no culture." She presumed now that the feeling was mutual. This could make things tricky, although then an idea presented itself. She tried to mentally get herself into a space where she could replicate Nilofar's clipped tones.

She finally dared to go up to a spice stall. "Do you have turmeric?" she said haughtily.

The spice stall owner looked at her apprehensively. "Yes, I do."

"Yes, *Hatun*." Idis was going to try to pull off the arrogant noblewoman act, where no one would remember much about her other than how irritating and arrogant she was.

The spice stall owner genuflected. "A thousand apologies. I did not realise. Yes, *Hatun*."

"Whence comes this turmeric? I must only have the freshest from Khand."

"It is from Khand," said the owner.

"Ah, but when was it delivered?" said Idis. "It must be *fresh*. Last time my slaves did not get me the freshest, and this is why I must be here myself."

The owner kept his face very still. "It was delivered a month ago."

Idis narrowed her eyes. "That is not fresh enough. I want to know of the next Khandian merchant to come through."

The owner shook his head. "Whether it was delivered last month or next week, it makes little difference, *Hatun*."

Idis said, "If you do not tell me I will go to another stall."

The owner stared at her and then as she left he called, "Hatun, the next merchant to come from Khand should be here in three days." She had been hoping that he was simply unable not to make a sale, no matter how arrogant and irritating she was. It seemed she was correct.

She turned and came back. "What is the name of this merchant? I will check you are telling the truth before I buy."

The owner made a masterful attempt to control his expression. "It is Kharssian-ul-Khut."

Idis sounded out the name. "I will check whether there really is a man of this name before I buy."

She went to several other stalls, and they all confirmed the same thing.

Then she swept off, the hem of her long robes dragging in the dirt. When she looked back one of the men standing at a fruit stall very deliberately hawked and spat on the ground, and the owner stared at her. Someone else muttered, "Half-elven demons from the North." Given that some rural Rohirrim had similar views, Idis was not surprised.

Idis noticed that everyone stiffened as she approached and then genuflected obsequiously. She thought she might come back as Lady Idis with Lord Thorongil, all smiles and apparently unable to speak much Haradric, purchasing bronze work presents for family. Thor would have to do the talking in case she was recognised, because her accent was so distinctive.

She was starting to get very hot and uncomfortable in this robe. She really did not understand how women could stand to wear them all day. She walked back to the alleyway behind the hotel, stood in the shade, and then ducked into the alley when she was sure no one was looking. With relief, she saw her hessian bag was still there, so she took off the robe and stuffed it in the bag. Then she looked in on Tirien, and told her she would need help with bathing and dressing for tonight.

"Of course," said Tirien. "This place—I thought Beyazim was different—but this is *really* different."

Idis went back upstairs, stashed away her outfit and kissed her husband. He was sitting at a desk writing. "I have a name of a man who is about to come through," she said. "Kharssian-ul-Khut."

Thor narrowed his eyes and repeated it. "How did you get it?"

"I was a very irritating and arrogant Northern Haradric noblewoman asking about the provenance of spices before I bought them," said Idis. "They hated me."

Thor leaned back on his chair. "I wonder what they think of the fact that the Emperor has Northern Haradric lineage?"

"So do I," said Idis. "In any case, I am going to go downstairs and bathe before our dinner." She fetched her Northern Haradric outfit from Nilofar, which now seemed an unfortunate choice, but it was the best Haradric outfit she had: she couldn't wear the black robe.

Tirien helped Idis bathe and dress, and arranged her headscarf appropriately. Thor looked at her appreciatively. "I prefer to see your hair, but you look very attractive in that outfit."

Then they set out for Asherbani's compound, accompanied by their two guards. Asherbani's house looked very plain from the outside, but once they were admitted into the courtyard, it was palatial:

marble fountains, exotic plants which must have required much water, and exquisite mosaics of historical scenes. Asherbani was a plump, shrewd, bearded man with quick, dark eyes. He wore a very exotic patterned *djellaba* in royal blue, covered in fine gold embroidery. Idis kept quiet and watched while Thor chatted to Asherbani. Then they were introduced to the two wives, who were clad all in black and lying prostrated on the floor. The women rose and led them to the dining room without speaking.

Idis was not sure what to say; she had been a bit taken aback by the prostrated wives – so she mostly kept silent. The veiled women watched her with large dark eyes, and ate daintily under their robes. The food was delicious: apple tea, dips and flatbread and then *kofte*. Idis spared a moment of thanks to Cothion for teaching her how to eat and sit correctly.

Then, as the third course was being served, the younger wife, Libbali, complimented Idis's outfit, something that Idis had been very nervous about, so she cast caution to the wind and replied in Haradric. She caught a glimpse of Thor's entertained face. They would have been less shocked had she stripped off her clothing and danced naked on the table, she suspected, particularly after she revealed her kinship with Aunt Nilofar. Asherbani was no fool: he realised immediately exactly who Idis's father was, which was not something they had necessarily been planning to raise.

Now that it was raised, however, they pursued it to its full advantage, making it known that her father was married to the ferocious Wraithslayer of Rohan. She found it very interesting that her parents' marriage was evidently not well known in this part of Harad.

Thor finally got to the important part of the conversation: the information about Khand, the assassins and the adulterated *café*, and delivered the message that Gondor was not prepared to accept this kind of conduct from Khandian merchants, and that the Embassy would work with Haradric merchants to prevent it in future.

Idis enjoyed the kebabs until she feared that they may be made from horse, but was relieved to hear they were made from camel. Then she bit into the kebab with a vengeance, thinking of how her grumpy camel spat at her on the journey.

She was astonished by the extraordinary dessert of sherbet, and naturally, enjoyed the *café* immensely. She asked the women about riding on a *mûmak*; they could not stop laughing.

Then Asherbani stood and spoke to Thor. "Come and smoke with me, and leave the women to talk about women's things, honoured friend." Idis knew that her husband did not smoke, but she would not have been able to tell from the smooth way in which he accepted the invitation. After the men had left, the two wives removed their face veils and covers with a sigh of relief and beamed at Idis. Zakhat was a square-faced woman who looked to be in her mid thirties, wearing a bright red outfit whereas Libbali was plump and pretty, wearing a green outfit, and looked to be in her mid twenties. They both wore elaborate chunky golden earrings, necklaces and bracelets, and Idis wondered if she could get some of these for her mother.

"You can remove your veil if you want, Lady Idis," said Libbali, kindly. "You only have to put it back on if our husband returns." Idis removed the veil and the women exclaimed at her hair colour.

"It is not as dark as other people of Gondor we have met," said Zakhat. "Nor is your husband's? I noticed his was almost ... coppery."

"In my mother's homeland, to have hair of that colour is lucky," said Idis. "But he hates it because it is unusual in Gondor."

Libbali giggled. "Is his hair that colour ... all over?" Zakhat looked at her expectantly too.

Idis blushed. "If you mean what I think you mean, well, yes." The two women laughed and laughed.

"Did you really want to see weaving?" said Zakhat.

"Most definitely," said Idis eagerly. "I brought several books with me from Gondor, but I have not actually seen looms."

Libbali sprang up with a smile. "Let us take her to the weaving room!" As they walked out, several children followed them, some of whom were male.

Zakhat noticed Idis looking, and said, "We do not have to veil for children." Then she kissed one of the girls who was nearby. "We are going to show this woman of Gondor the looms. Can you light the lamps, Zahara?" The girl ran ahead and lit the lamps.

Idis gasped at the weaving room. The room was filled with coloured carpets, but the flickering light made it look like the figures, animals and plants on the carpets were almost moving. There was a large loom with a half-finished design of exquisite complexity.

Libbali sat down at the chair in front of the loom. "You see, what I do is this—" she quickly threaded the shuttle under the warp of the loom, sticking her tongue out as she did so. Idis watched closely.

"That is amazing. Can I touch what you have done so far?"

Libbali assented, so Idis touched the weaving very gently with her forefinger. "So soft. I must get one of these for my mother. She loves colourful weavings. Our house is full of them."

Zakhat raised her eyebrows. "I did not know Horse people shared a love of weaving?"

"Actually, they are not as dissimilar to Haradrim as one might think," said Idis. "The children I met at the oasis on the way here reminded me of Rohirric children, apart from the colouring—too scared to approach Númenórean half-elves."

Zakhat blinked. "That is a very interesting similarity."

"Some people in Rohan were shocked when my mother married my father," noted Idis. "Marshal Éothain suspected that their children would have elf-ears." She lifted up her hair. "We do not."

Libbali laughed. "No, your ears look normal."

"Can I look at some other designs?"

"I would be delighted," said Libbali, and Zakhat handed over carpets while Libbali explained the designs. "This is one we make for a wedding—see those palm date trees there?—this for the birth of a child—this one for the death of a grandparent—oh, and this one is for the loss of a child before birth—"

To her embarrassment, Idis's eyes suddenly filled with tears. She had thought the grief was lessening. She turned her face away and said, "My apologies."

There was a rustle as Zakhat put down the carpets, and patted her. "O, you poor girl. When?"

"A little under a month ago," sniffed Idis.

Libbali frowned, her eyes also full of tears. "That is so sad."

"Of course, I had miscarriages and troubles," said Zakhat. "That is why I got my husband to take Libbali as a wife. He would not divorce me, although I begged him. It was a love marriage you see."

Libbali wiped her eyes and clasped her hands under her chin. "But tell her, Zakhat! There is a happy ending!"

Zakhat smiled. "Yes, there is. So when Libbali fell pregnant, I was very happy, because the next best thing to me having a child was my sister-wife having one. And then, after Libbali had her eldest child, I realised I was bearing one of my own. That is my eldest, Zaid. He is ten years now. Zahara, whom you saw before, is my second eldest."

Idis said, "Thank you, honoured sisters." She shrugged. "Your advice sounds similar to my mother's. She told me to stop worrying about it and just enjoy myself, and the more I stopped worrying, the more likely it is for the natural thing to happen—"

Zakhat roared with laughter. "You know, I never thought I would say this of a Horse Person, but I like the sound of your mother!"

Libbali handed her the rolled rug. "Here. This is for you."

"O no, I could not—" said Idis. "This is too beautiful. I really cannot."

Zakhat said firmly, "We insist. After all you are going to provide us with entertainment by riding a *mûmak*—"

"Can I get my mother to send you a rug from her people, at least? I think you would really enjoy it. The Rohirrim favour bright colours, and lots of horses, of course."

Libbali said, "Yes, please send it. I would be interested in seeing such different work."

"It is not quite as fine as yours," said Idis. "But I love those rugs because they remind me of when I was a little girl. Mother puts them all around the house because she says people of Gondor are very boring."

Libbali laughed. "They always favour black or white! They *are* boring."

"My father is the worst," said Idis. "He is most severe because he was brought up never to have any fun. So my mother makes up for it by wearing crazy amounts of gold jewellery."

Zakhat said, "She almost sounds Haradric!" and touched her earrings.

"Before I came here, I thought all Haradrim were like Aunt Nilofar," said Idis. "Aunt Nilofar and her family are not very different from people who live in Gondor."

Libbali said, "Hah! Horondorim *are* Westrons. They do not count." Then she looked around. "Do not tell anyone in Beyazim we think that."

Idis smiled. "Who would I say it to anyway? We keep to ourselves in the Embassy."

They went back into the courtyard and watched the children running around and playing under the torch lights. Evidently it was some kind of hiding game. One small child was daring enough to hide under Idis's skirts, a hiding place which puzzled her siblings for some time.

"This has been very pleasant," said Idis. "I was scared before I came that we would not have anything in common."

Zakhat smiled. "We have much in common and much that is different."

"I wonder how the men are doing?" said Libbali.

"It depends what Lord Thorongil thinks of ancient Haradric poetry," said Zakhat.

Idis laughed. "He *loves* ancient Haradric poetry."

Libbali took Idis's arm. "We want to keep you. We shall look after you, and feed you and make you less thin, and then you shall conceive a child with your husband, and no longer be sad. And your husband can talk of ancient Haradric poetry with our husband."

"I do not mind it, although Libbali finds it wearying," said Zakhat. "But he can talk of it for hours."

Idis helped the women round up the children (the promise of stories of the Horse people worked a treat) and then told them the story of Eorl.

Libbali sighed with pleasure at the end when Eorl tamed the horse Felarof. "It is sad that the father died, but happy that the son gained the horse."

"The Steward of Gondor who allowed the Rohirrim to stay was my father's ancestor Cirion." Idis smiled. "So I am the descendant of Cirion on my father's side and Eorl on my mother's. I suppose they would not have foreseen that they would have a shared descendant who would be sitting in Harad telling this tale to some children?"

Zaid looked at her with wide eyes. "Are you really descended from *both* those people?"

Idis nodded. "Yes, I am. My father is the Steward of Gondor, and my mother is the sister of the King of Rohan."

"What are you doing in Qarshoom then?" said one of the little girls, doubtfully. "Should you not be in a palanquin waving a peacock feather?"

Idis shrugged. "My husband and I both enjoy Haradric people and culture. We wanted to talk to your Baba about *café*. I am only the fifth child, so not very important."



“Do you have children?” said another little boy, and Zakhat hissed at him.

“No it is fine,” said Idis, patting Zakhat’s arm. “I do not yet have children, but I hope to have some in the future. I have not been married long.”

Then a slave came in and whispered something to Zakhat, and Zakhat laughed. “Forgive us, Lady Idis, but I think our husband has gotten your husband ... inebriated. You may have to escort him home.”

Idis stared. “He does not usually drink to excess?”

Libbali laughed. “No, it would be pipe weed mixed with *hashish*. He has not had it before?”

Idis put her hand to her forehead. “No. This is going to be interesting. Must we robe again?”

Zakhat indicated that they should, so they went back to the dining room and donned robes again, and Zakhat adjusted Idis’s scarf properly. Then they went out to the entrance area.

Shortly afterwards, Asherbani emerged, beaming, but still sharp eyed, accompanied by an owl-eyed Thor. It took Thor a moment to see Idis, but then he knelt on the ground before her, and clasped her hands. “Thy beauty fills my heart and my eyes, beautiful lover. The stars in the sky are nothing to thee; their light dims in thy presence.”

Zakhat, Libbali and Asherbani all laughed. So did their waiting guards, although they could not have understood the poem: it had been in Old Haradric.

“O dear,” said Idis, helping Thor up, and speaking to him in Westron. “I love you too.”

“But I really love thee, Idis,” said Thor earnestly, in Westron, his eyes still wide, and he attempted to snuggle up to her.

“Yes, dear,” said Idis, pushing him away so that he was back upright. “I think I shall take you home.” Then she turned to the others. “Thank you so much for your hospitality. We enjoyed ourselves immensely. May peace follow you.”

Then they both bowed low, and the guards escorted them back to the inn.

“Did I tell you that I love you, Idis?” said Thor, and one of the guards snickered.

Idis patted his arm. “You did, darling. If you love me you will let me ride a *mûmak*.”

“I will give you whatever you desire, my heart.”

“Good: my wish is to ride a *mûmak*. Now, be quiet or you may wake people. You can tell me more about it – quietly – when we get back to our room.”

The guards helped her steer Thor up the stairs to their room. “Good luck, my Lady; we are going to sleep.” They left, chuckling.

Idis took off the headscarf and her Haradric outfit, and folded it over the chair, then noticed Thor was staring at her.

"What are you doing, Thor?"

"I am thinking how beautiful you are."

"You need to get into bedclothes," said Idis, then put on her nightgown and went to wash her face. When she got back, Thor had taken off his jacket and dropped it on the floor, and half unbuttoned his shirt, but was still fully clothed and staring at the wall with a half-smile.

She picked up the jacket and put it on the other chair and then sat him down on the bed and took off his clothing like he was a child. He was quite biddable. Then she went to get his nightgown. "I don't want to wear that," he said, sadly. "I want you to take off your nightgown, like that time you crept into my room before we married. Because, well, I don't know if I told you this before: I love you more than anything else in the world."

She stripped off her nightgown. "You did tell me that. I am not quite sure how this is going to go while you are in this state, but why not?"

Then they made love, and it was mostly normal other than Thor's tendency to look at her with wide eyes and momentarily forget what he was doing, but he resumed as soon as she reminded him. Afterwards he rolled over and went to sleep immediately. Idis did not have the heart to wake him and change him, so she just put on her own nightgown and hoped there were no midnight emergencies which required them to evacuate in the middle of the night.

When she woke in the morning, Thor was groaning. "My head feels like it is stuffed with wool."

She laughed and said, "You were inebriated on *hashish*. I hope you did not give away any secrets."

Thor frowned. "None at all! We discussed poetry and trade." His eyes brightened. "Asherbani Khan showed me some lovely poetry."

"Do you recall that you agreed to let me ride a *mûmak* while inebriated?"

Thor squinted at her and she saw remembrance dawn. "By the Valar, I do not think that is true agreement, Idis. You took advantage of me. I will tell Ecthelion on you—"

Idis grinned. "I will not hold you to it. But, well, I really want to try it."

Thor sighed. "I am not going to hear the end of it, am I?" Then he smiled. "I will let you do it on one condition—that I am also allowed to ride the *mûmak*."

Idis said, worriedly, "O, but I thought you told me once that you did not ride well?"

Thor laughed. "The shoe is on the other foot now. I can ride well enough, just not as well as you."

Then the anxious servant brought up their breakfast, and Idis swallowed the sour milky drink and the dates with difficulty. After that she said, "What else must we do today?"

"I suppose we must look out for this Khandian, and see if there are any other spice merchants." Thor shrugged. "We could invite Asherbani Khan and his wives to the *mûmak* riding and make subtle inquiries? I can say that I want to know because we want to keep an eye on Khandian traders."

"Or perhaps my arrogant Northern Haradric lady can make daily inquiries at the spice merchants?" suggested Idis.

"Maybe both," said Thor. "But for the moment, why do we not go out into town and have a look around? We can also see if someone will let us ride a *mûmak*."

"I am not going to speak in Haradric in the market in case I am recognised by my accent," said Idis. "I will let you do the speaking. I wish I had not spoken to that *mûmak* handler yesterday, but it cannot be helped."

"*Mûmak* handlers are called 'mahout'," said Thor solemnly. "Shall we go and ask the inn keeper if he knows whether anyone will let us ride one?"

They went downstairs and found the innkeeper in the courtyard. Thor conveyed their request to him. The innkeeper laughed and stared. "You wish to *what*?"

"We both wish to ride a *mûmak*," said Thor.

The innkeeper looked up at Idis. "It is not for women."

Thor inclined his head. "She is no ordinary woman. Look at the sword she bears."

"True," said the innkeeper. "I will find a *mûmak* for you."

They went out into the market. "I see nice bronzework," said Idis in Westron. "I thought of getting little bronze decorative knives for my nieces and nephews."

"You cannot give small children knives, Idis," said Thor.

"Only the older ones," said Idis. "I will not give them to the babies." She started to mentally calculate how many she would need.

Thor laughed. "Let us see what there is. No doubt, given the nature of your family, some of them would like knives, but some of them might like other things."

Idis grabbed Thor. "Look! This shop has headscarves, *djellaba* and turbans! You need one for the ride home."

Thor went to the stall and said in Haradric, "I need a turban to keep the sun off my head. I got sunburned, and then I had to wear my wife's headscarf."

The stall keeper laughed. "Well, sahib, that is what happens when you have skin the colour of milk. You are not made for here. What colour do you want?"

Thor turned to Idis and spoke in Westron. "What colour do you think I should have?"

Idis smiled at him. "I think you should get two. One in white and one in green."

Thor turned back to the stall keeper, and spoke in Haradric again. "My wife thinks I should get one in green and one in white. Do I get a discount for two?"

They haggled, and then the stall keeper said, "What if I put in a headscarf for your wife? It will only be one extra silver piece."

Thor shook his head. "No, look, she has a scarf. And that is too much. Five coppers only."

The store keeper held out a blue and green one with a swirled marbled pattern. "This would suit her." Then he turned to Idis and said in Westron. "Look! You look!"

"This is pretty." Idis held it up to her face. "See?"

The stall keeper laughed and said in Haradric, "She likes it, man of Gondor. You have no choice."

"You are going to beggar me," complained Thor. They haggled for several minutes more until they had reached a mutually satisfactory price.

Idis took her scarf with pride, and draped it over her arm. "Thank you," she said in Haradric, trying to make it as different from her normal accent as possible.

When they got back to the inn, the innkeeper said that a carpet had been delivered, and was rolled up in their room, from Asherbani Khan and his wives. Idis had forgotten to take it last night.

He also said that he had arranged for them to ride a *mûmak* that afternoon outside town, once the *mûmakil* had finished their shifts, where the cameleers and mahouts kept their beasts, and that fortunately the mahouts had been very curious rather than offended by the thought of a woman riding a *mûmak*. Idis had not actually thought about the possibility that they might be offended, so she was relieved. Thor quickly wrote a note to Asherbani Khan, inviting him and his wives along to watch and then said they were going to rest upstairs, and would like some apple tea.

Idis then crept back downstairs and put on her black robe disguise in the back alley, and went out into the market. To her pleasure, people were talking openly and incredulously about the mad couple of Gondor who were going to ride *mûmakil*. She did not think they would be doing that if they suspected that she was one half of the mad couple. When she got to the spice store, the stall owner sighed. "Tomorrow, Hatun, my sources say tomorrow."

"I hope so," she said.

"Did you hear that a madwoman and madman from Gondor are going to ride a *mûmak* outside town this afternoon?" said the stall owner.

Idis clicked her tongue. "How utterly improper, for a woman to be riding a *mûmak*! I have no interest in such idiocy. I shall be back tomorrow. I am going to my lodgings." She walked off in the opposite direction to the inn, and then looped back around through the back alleys, and went into the alley behind the inn and changed again.

When she crept back upstairs, Thor said, "I left half of the apple tea for you? It is a bit cold now."

"The spice merchant is supposed to come tomorrow, and I do not mind if the tea is a little cold," said Idis, and kissed him. "We are notorious again, dear, everyone is talking about the mad couple from Gondor who want to ride *mûmakil*—"

Thor laughed. "If our career as diplomats and intelligence agents fails, we can run a travelling freakshow around Harad with ourselves as the star exhibits. I am going to wander down to the customs office to have a chat with them. I do not know how much they will speak to a strange Gondorim Trade attaché, but one can always try."

Meanwhile, Idis unrolled the carpet and inspected it in the light of day. It was exquisite: deep red, with flowers and little swirls. Then she carefully rolled it back up, went downstairs and had a long bath.

In the afternoon, they went out to the *mûmakil* grounds outside town. A reasonable crowd had gathered. Asherbani was standing right at the front, wearing a small red hat, and a magenta-coloured djellaba. He grinned broadly and waved, then pointed to the palanquin next to him, around which children of many ages were arrayed. Their cameleer was also there, with all of his men, and they waved too.

One of the mahouts came out: the same man they had seen by the wharf. He laughed. "I thought so." Then he said to Thor, "Could you help me to get your wife on the *mûmak*? I do not want to touch another man's wife."

"Of course," said Thor. They climbed up the wooden steps, Idis in front, Thor behind and the mahout behind them. To Idis's fascination, the *mûmak* had coarse hairs on the top of its head which had not been so visible from below. It also had a large rope collar.

"You must help her to sit on Binah's neck." The mahout paused. "Can she put one leg on either side of the *mûmak*'s neck?"

Thor held Idis while she settled herself on the animal's neck. She flinched a little when the animal flapped its large grey ears, but it seemed to be quite normal. Everyone gasped when they saw that she was actually wearing split skirts rather than a dress. This had evidently been a point of concern. "Tell her to grip onto the rope tightly," said the mahout. Idis did so, and then dared to look down at everyone.

Then the mahout got down off the stand and led the animal around with a rope and the goad. The pace was slow and lumbering, and actually not at all uncomfortable. The scariest part was the height.

"Now the man shall go on Binah's daughter Aru," said the mahout, and another mahout helped Thor on. Thor waved at Idis, and Idis blew him a kiss. Everyone laughed.

The mahouts led them around and then a baby elephant ran out and started annoying the older elephants. Idis's elephant smacked the baby elephant with her trunk and the baby elephant fell behind with Thor. "She is a grumpy grandmother," said the mahout.

Suddenly Idis's elephant stopped, picked up some dust with her trunk and sprinkled it on the top of her head. Idis shielded her eyes with one hand, and blinked. She was determined not to shriek, but had to bite the insides of her cheeks to achieve it.

"It is to keep away flies," said the mahout. They led them half way around the town and then back again.

Thor dismounted first and then helped Idis off. Everyone clapped when they got down, and they both bowed. Then the mahouts gave the mûmakil a woven wicker ball and the mûmakil kicked it back and forth. Meanwhile, the baby mûmak had been given a coconut to keep it quiet. It was trying to break off a shoot growing out of the coconut with its trunk, but it could not hold the coconut still with its foot as the foot was flat. Thor reached down, broke off the shoot and gave it to the baby mûmak. The baby mûmak took the shoot and ate it, and then patted Thor all over with its trunk and did a little swaying dance. The mahouts laughed. "He likes you, man of Gondor!"

Then they paid the agreed sum for the ride to the mahouts, and went to go back to the inn. The baby mûmak went to follow Thor.

"No, no!" he said in Westron. "Your home is here! I cannot take you back to Gondor!" Everyone laughed.

The mûmak looked soulfully at Thor, and Idis wondered what her parents would think if she installed a mûmak in Emyn Arnen. Cirion, of course, would be delighted, but she suspected the mûmak would be cold and would miss its family, and regretfully abandoned her happy daydream.

A mahout hit it gently with a stick. "No, you bad baby! You stay with your family."

Thor talked with Asherbani as they went back into town. "Thank you again for dinner. I am sorry that I was a little—disoriented—at the end."

Idis could hear Asherbani's wives' laughter from inside the palanquin.

"Can I ask you a question about a Khandian merchant, Asherbani Khan?" Thor said to Asherbani. "A man called Kharssian-ul-Khut."

Asherbani grimaced. "You have had the misfortune of dealing with this man? He is most unscrupulous and even more insane than the usual. Some Khandians are better than others. I would not trust him, Thorongil Khan."

Thor bowed his head. "That is all I wanted to know, and you have confirmed my impression. It relates to an incident back at Beyazim involving interests of Gondor. Thank you."

They got to the inn and Asherbani nodded to Thor. "Most entertaining. I am sure I shall see you one day again in Beyazim or here, Thorongil Khan."

Thor bowed back. "The pleasure is all mine."

"Can I talk to the wives?" Idis asked Thor quietly in Westron.

Asherbani said to Thor, "Tell your wife she may look in and say goodbye. I think my wives would like that."

So Idis carefully got into the palanquin. Zakhat and Libbali smiled and grasped her hands. "You did it!" said Libbali. "Was it scary?"

"A little when the mûmak put dirt on her head," said Idis. "Other than that, I preferred it to camels. Slow and rolling."

"This is going to go down in the history of Qarshoom," said Zakhat. "The woman of the Horse People who had to ride *everything*, including camels and a mûmak."

"I certainly hope so," said Idis. "I will get my mother to send you a rug and perhaps some honey? But now I must go." She kissed both women on the cheeks.

"Peace and farewell," said both women. "Good luck with babies," added Zakhat.

Idis carefully left the palanquin, and they waved good bye as the family went back to their compound.

"What was that about babies?" said Thor, in Westron. "The baby mûmak?"

Idis shook her head and looked away. "No. I might have cried when they showed me a particular rug for women who had lost children before they were born, and they might have discovered what I was crying about."

Thor said, "I did not realise you were still so sad. And there I was, wandering around with a head full of wool—" Idis shoved down an intense feeling of frustration.

As they entered the courtyard of the inn, the innkeeper looked at them sidelong. "You are alive?"

"It was fun," said Thor. "Better than camels. Thank you very much for humouring us. Now we will be able to boast to my wife's brothers and uncle."

"Will spiced fish with rice and almonds be good for dinner?"

"That will be excellent," said Thor. "But first could we bathe to get off the mûmak dust? They are dusty animals—"

"I shall get someone to fill two baths," said the innkeeper.

Thor was right: mûmakil were surprisingly dusty animals, and Idis discovered that Binah had put dust and dirt in her hair. As Tirien combed her hair after the bath, she said to Idis, "I never imagined when I became a maid that I would be washing away dust that a mûmak put in someone's hair, m'Lady."

Idis laughed. "Life is strange."

Dinner was delicious: it was some kind of firm-fleshed white fish Idis had never had before, in a curry sauce. Afterwards, they sat together on the end of the bed, and Thor said, "So what do we do tomorrow?"

"I suppose we see if this merchant comes and then find out his plans, and follow him?"

Thor grimaced. "What if he is the wrong one? I am thinking of bribing someone in customs here to tell me by pigeon every time a Khandian merchant comes through Qarshoom. I will tell them the story of the assassins in Minas Tirith to explain my interest in Khandian merchants."

"That is a good idea," said Idis. "You could arrange that tomorrow while I pretend to be the arrogant woman again?"

Thor hesitated. "I am sorry I did not realise you were still so sad about the baby. It just—never felt real to me. Everything will work out. We will have another—"

Idis laughed bitterly. "You sound like your mother."

Thor looked defensive. "Sometimes it is good to be positive. Think how much worry I could have avoided if I had approached our wedding like Mama did?"

Idis smiled. "Do you think she realises yet that we got caught sleeping together before we married?"

Thor made a face. "I hope not! It was bad enough that Papa and my brothers guessed. Denethor was the absolute worst; he thinks I am a total idiot, even more than he did before."

"He boasts incessantly about his clever little brother. Carandir told me."

Thor laughed. "Haha, very funny, Idis!"

"I am not jesting. He is proud of you, in an 'I-stuff-my-shirt-with-pillows' kind of way."

"That week, when I was waiting to hear from you whether you were pregnant, was one of the worst weeks of my life—" said Thor, fiddling with the sheets on the bed.

Idis stared at Thor. "It was?"

"I was really scared: what if I'm not a good father? Also I was in disgrace with Papa and my brothers for 'jumping the fence' as Papa put it, and I was worried about the impact it might have on them—"

Idis put her hand out and patted Thor's hand. "I am so sorry. I did not realise." Her earlier irritation regarding Thor's lack of perceptiveness was thrown into sudden, uncomfortable relief.

Thor blinked. "Well, how could you know? You were in Eryn Irien!"

"I was in some ways disappointed when it turned out I wasn't pregnant." Idis smiled at Thor. "I have never had any doubts about whether you'd be a good father, it may interest you to know. I would not have wanted to sleep with you otherwise—"

"Huh," said Thor. "I did not realise that you were disappointed? I presumed you were relieved."

"I was both relieved and disappointed." Idis paused. "I have just remembered what you said back in Berylim: about drinking both mead and resin wine with Duinon while you waited for my news. Was it because you were so worried? Were you ill?"

Thor grimaced. "Yes. I threw up for hours and was too unwell to work the next day."

Idis looked at him with concern. "Dear Thor! But what happened was my fault, not yours—"

"There were two of us involved in the decision, if I recall what happened?"

Idis put her arms around her husband and kissed him. "'Decision?' That's putting it too highly. I do not recall any rational decision-making process on either of our parts, just pure lust—"



Thor looked uncomfortable and shifted on the bed, adjusting his trousers. "Hmm. Thinking back to that incident, another part of me was making the decision."

Idis looked down and laughed. "The same part of you which is rather obviously making a decision right now?"

"The very same."

Idis felt a corresponding warm ache between her legs. "Fortunately for you, my body is inclined to agree."

The next morning, she woke and looked out over Qarshoom for what she suspected would be the last time. She had become quite fond of it: the break from Beyazim had been welcome, although she would not miss the Southern Haradric breakfasts.

She and Thor walked out into the city, and down to the docks. To Idis's disappointment, Binah the mûmak was not there today. Then they walked down to the customs office. The red-hatted officials looked up and one of them rose and bowed. "Thorongil Khan. How can we help you?"

Thor said, "As I was telling you yesterday, last year Gondor had difficulty with Khandian merchants trying to undercut Haradric café sales. Are you able to tell me which merchants from Khand have been through Qarshoom in the last month, and send me a pigeon in the next month when one comes through? I will, of course, pay for your costs and other associated expenditure."

The red-hatted man frowned. "I am sorry, Khan, but we cannot help. Our duty is to Harad, not Gondor."

Thor smiled. "I understand, of course. My wife and I will browse the market before we leave."

They walked back out to the market and Idis said, "Can I look at the bronze work?"

"You can look at whatever you want, dear," said Thor.

Idis looked at little bronze knives, bronze bells and other items for her nieces and nephews. She looked up. "What do you think of bells for—?" Then she realised Thor was talking quietly to one of the men from the customs office, but he was no longer wearing his little red hat. She went back to looking at the items. The man behind the stall helpfully got out a variety of items including candle-snuffers, belt buckles and coat hooks, which she inspected minutely, although she did not really have much need for coat hooks. Then he brightened and got out some little bronze bowls with mûmakil stamped on the edge. "Mûmakil, mûmakil," he said.

"That is nice," said Thor. "You should get one."

Idis laughed. "We need thirty-one. That is how many nephews and nieces we have combined, not counting the one Morwen is carrying."

Thor said, "By the Valar, I suppose we do. That explains the number of children running around at our wedding—"

Then he switched to Haradric and said, "We need thirty-two bowls for our nieces and nephews, and one bronze knife."

"Thirty-two?" said the merchant. "You do not mean twenty-two? Or twelve? Or two?"

"No, I am one of five children and my wife is one of ten. We have a lot of nieces and nephews, so I will need a discount—"

The merchant laughed. "Are you sure you are not Haradrim?"

They began negotiations. Meanwhile Idis turned and watched the spice stalls. Then she stiffened. A man with a plaited black beard and a long crimson robe with slits in it was leaving one of the spice stalls.

Finally Thor purchased the bowls and the knife. "Who is the knife for?" said Idis.

Thor laughed. "I do not know. It was a whim. We can use it as a paper knife?"

"Did you know that I only heard of paper knives a few years ago? I have always used my daggers," said Idis. "Anyway, we need to pack—"

They walked back to the inn, and divided the bowls and the knife between their bags. Then Thor said very quietly, "That man was willing to give me the information I needed."

Idis snorted. "Obviously. But I saw a Khandian coming from one of the spice stalls. I think my arrogant woman from Northern Harad needs to have one last outing. May I take some money from your wallet? I will need to buy some turmeric—"

Then she surreptitiously donned her outfit in the back alley, and went to annoy the spice merchants of Qarshoom for what she hoped was the last time.

As she approached the original stall owner she had irritated, he smiled and said, "Hatun, you are in luck. I have just received spices from Khand."

Idis sighed. "At last!" Then she stopped. "When was it delivered and by whom?"

The stall owner said, "This morning, Hatun, by a Khandian."

"Kharssian-ul-Khut?"

"Yes, that is the man," said the owner.

"Let me see the turmeric," said Idis. The owner scooped a small amount up with a bronze spoon and Idis inspected it minutely.

"I will buy this," she said. The stall owner got out the scales and she made him scoop out a large amount, and then they haggled over the price extensively. She had to pretend to walk away three times. Eventually she agreed to pay the price.

"Thank you, Hatun," said the man.

"I hope this spice is acceptable after all this difficulty," said Idis, and then walked off, tucking the bag into her sleeve.

She wandered around the stalls for some time more, and then headed back to the inn in a roundabout way and changed in the back alley, and put her robe into the hessian sack she had left there. Then she headed upstairs.

“Yes, our man is here and he delivered turmeric to the stall owner,” Idis told Thor, dumping her hessian sack on the bed. Then she said, “Have some turmeric!” and handed over the large bag.

Thor laughed. “Perhaps we can give some of this to the innkeeper; I do not know that I want the camels to have to carry this.”

Idis sniffed. “I feel no sorrow for the camels, but I am happy to give a gift to the innkeeper.”

“Well, I think we should probably contact our cameleer,” said Thor. “I presume we will be leaving tomorrow, and then see what we can find out about this man back in Beyazim when we have Arahaelon’s contacts at our disposal?”

“Yes,” said Idis. “That is a sensible plan.”

She went downstairs to tell Tirien, and then stopped at Tirien’s door as she heard a male voice; one of the door guards they had taken with them. Tirien laughed in response. She turned around and went back upstairs. “I think Tirien has taken one of our guards to her bed,” she told Thor.

Thor shrugged. “I can only repeat what your father said to me: ‘It would be rather hypocritical if I was outraged’.”

Idis raised an eyebrow. “Well, indeed, yes. But I thought you should know for future reference.”

Thor sighed. “Yes, you are right. I hope that he is an honourable fellow.”

At that moment there was a soft knock on the door, and the anxious servant stood there with kebabs, flat bread and café for lunch, so they put the conversation on hold.

They spent the rest of that afternoon packing. While Thor was downstairs talking to the cameleer, Idis said to Tirien, “If you ever wish to marry, you can talk to me about it—”

Tirien gaped at her, and her face drained, and then went bright red. “Yes, m’Lady.” She fled downstairs. Idis worried that maybe she had not handled the matter well, and wished she had more of her father’s tact.

Thor came back upstairs. “I passed Tirien on my way back, in urgent conversation with the taller guard, which answers one question I had—”

“I just said that if she was thinking of getting married, she could talk to me about it,” said Idis, defensively.

Thor laughed. “You have convinced them that you have your father’s abilities. The only part of their conversation I overheard was the man saying, ‘Like the Prince Steward, then’.”

“I often wonder how much of Father’s ability is just understanding how people work and quietly watching them,” said Idis.

The next day, they took leave of Qarshoom, and headed back home. The innkeeper said, "It has been very interesting having you stay, please visit again."

The journey home was uneventful. When they got to the oasis one day out of Beyazim, Idis said to her husband, "Do we still have any of those boiled sweets we gave to Asherbani's children?" There were still a handful, so she attempted to distribute them to the children of the oasis.

Nervously, the children took the sweets, and watched as she put one in her mouth. Then they put them in their own mouths and smiled.

"We thought you were an accursed elf," said one child. "You are so tall and thin."

"No," said Idis. "I am tall and thin because my Umma and Baba are tall and thin. You can see I do not have Elf ears. They are not pointed like those of Elves; they are just like yours." She loosened her scarf to show them her ears and the children gave appreciative *aahs*.

Beyazim seemed huge and white after small brown Qarshoom. When they reached the camel camp outside Beyazim, the cameleer sent a man to the Embassy.

Arahaelon and Cothion came out to meet them, and Arahaelon paid the cameleer generously. "I am sorry for any disadvantage having to wait for them while their business was finished," he told the cameleer.

"It was all well," said the cameleer genially. "We saw the Hatun ride a mûmak, and that itself was worth ten gold."

Cothion stared at Idis. "You did *not*?" he said in Westron. "That is men's business, my Lady! Women do not ride mûmakil."

Idis coloured slightly. "My brothers and uncle shall be insanely jealous," she said to Cothion by way of explanation. "Cirion will probably come to Harad just to try it."

Cothion shook his head while Arahaelon and the cameleer laughed. Then they walked back into Beyazim as porters ran out to take their luggage.

"How was the trip?" said Arahaelon.

"Very interesting and very productive," said Thor. Then he squinted. "It was also good to have a break from the noise and bustle of Beyazim."

They went back to the Embassy and were greeted fondly by most people: the cleaner, the courtyard sweepers, Haldir and Romdaer. The Ambassador was nowhere to be seen, and Lady Nidhien did not come out either.

Later, after they had bathed, they quickly briefed Arahaelon, Thor said, "What of the Ambassador?"

Arahaelon shrugged. "He has just—given up?" Then his eyes sharpened. "I will get some people to go to the gate and find out if this Kharssian-ul-Khut has come through yet."

When Idis got back to her desk, Bergon was just as he had been when she had left. "Hullo my Lady."

She bowed her head. "Hullo Bergon."

As Cothion passed, Bergon put up his hand and said, "Cothion, get *café* for the Lady Idis and me."

Cothion looked anxious and said, "I shall be right back, my Lord."

"Cothion, stop!" Idis stood. "O, Bergon, no no no. Would you ask me to fetch *café*?"

"I might have done had you not outranked me as an Attaché in your own right," said Bergon honestly. "I do not see what the problem is?"

Idis narrowed her mouth. "Cothion is intelligent and rarely gifted in the local culture and language. We do not misuse his talent, Lord Bergon, just because he ranks below us."

Thor came wandering out. "What is the noise about? I am trying to get through my backlog of mail."

"Bergon is making Cothion fetch *café* for him," said Idis.

Thor's eyes narrowed. "O, no, you do not do this, Bergon." He did not even wait for Bergon to reply, but stalked off. Shortly thereafter Arahaelon called Bergon into his office.

"I am sorry if I did the wrong thing," said Cothion, wretchedly as Thor came back.

Thor's eyes flashed. "*You* did not do the wrong thing, Cothion. Would Bergon ask me to fetch *café*, even if I were still Third Trade Attaché? I think not. He uses you because you are part-Haradric, a commoner, young, and uncertain of your status. I will not stand for it." He stalked off again.

"He is a little scary when he is angry," said Cothion.

"Aye, one does not see it often," said Idis. "I should note that your tutoring was invaluable for our time in Qarshoom. Our visit to Asherbani Khan was most successful."

Cothion turned pink. "I am glad to hear it, my Lady."

Bergon returned looking mutinous and sulky. Thor called Cothion away 'for a meeting', although as far as Idis could see, it was simply a ploy to keep Cothion away from Bergon. Idis decided to ignore Bergon, and re-read her book on weaving patterns. It was interesting how the book read differently now she had seen Libbali's weaving.

Idis discovered when she changed for bed that her bleeding time had started. She was bitterly disappointed: she had been very carefully trying not to think about it, but had also been filled with hope.

Thor kissed her forehead when she told him. "We shall have lots of fun trying again once your bleeding finishes, no?"

She laughed through her disappointment. "I had not thought of that."

The next day, one of Arahaelon's informants told him that Kharssian-ul-Khat had arrived in Beyazim. Idis went to her favourite spice merchant to talk to him about it.

The spice merchant said, "Where you unwell again, Hatun?"

"We were travelling. We went to Qarshoom for trade." Idis paused. "Do you know of a man called Kharssian-ul-Khat?"

The spice merchant grimaced. "I try not to know him. I would avoid him."

Idis said, "That is what they said in Qarshoom. Do you know where he is in Beyazim? We want to know so we can continue to avoid him."

The spice merchant said, "As far as I know he is in one of the warehouses on the fifth quadrant of the first level."

"Thank you," said Idis. She quickly scouted out the fifth quadrant of the first level so that she could report back to Arahaelon. She walked past Farzad's arena, into the fifth quadrant. The canal running through the area was scummy and green, and smelled rank. She asked a man where the warehouses were, and he grunted and pointed to the back street. In the alley behind the canal, the stench of garbage and urine hung in the air. A bony golden-eyed black cat chased a rat down the street but there was no one else there. She crept quietly down the street and approached one of the opened windows, then stood on her toes to peer through. She was sure that she saw someone wearing a scarlet robe disappear behind a door, and strained to see. Otherwise the room was empty. She went back to the Embassy to tell Arahaelon and Thor.

Arahaelon said, "I think they may be planning to disrupt the Festival of the Blessing of the Water at the end of this week. The Emperor will make a public appearance—"

"That feels right to me," said Idis. "What do we do?"

"I will get some of my people to watch the warehouse," said Arahaelon.

The next day, she visited the Empress Mother for *café*. The usual eunuch took her up to the Empress Mother's apartment.

"Hullo, I went to Qarshoom," she said, as she entered.

"I know." The Empress Mother wrinkled her nose. "They are awfully ... rural down there."

"I rode a mûmak," said Idis proudly, and the eunuch stifled a noise as he exited the room.

The Empress Mother laughed. "If you wanted to do that, my dear, you could have just asked me. I would have arranged for you to do it privately: it is not really a thing that women do. I am sure that you have horrified the locals for the next twenty years. Even the eunuch who guided you here is shocked enough, just in the telling."

"I think we have, but the visit was useful," said Idis. "We spoke with the head of the café guild, Asherbani Khan."

"That is good," said the Empress Mother.

"I think our Embassy is making progress with regard to our problems with the Khandians."

The Empress Mother raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Thank you for telling me."

"I am looking forward to the Festival of the Blessing of the Waters," said Idis. "I heard from our Deputy Ambassador that the Emperor will appear publicly?"

"Yes," said the Empress Mother, frowning. "He will be well guarded."

"That is very good to know," said Idis.

Arahaelon set watchers on the various warehouses in the fifth quadrant of the first circle. For the next four days, Kharssian-ul-Khut's movements appeared entirely unexceptional. Idis began to worry that they had the wrong man. Thor's contacts in Qarshoom had not yet contacted him with the names of other Khandian merchants passing through.

The day before the Festival, Idis decided to go shopping. "Would you like to meet my favourite spice merchant, Cothion? He only knows me in full black garb, so you may have to wear Haradric garb."

Cothion sighed. "Baba made me pack some djellaba. I can wear one. I am not wearing the orange and turquoise one though: it makes me look jaundiced and ridiculous."

He went to his room and then emerged. Idis stared. "You look totally different, Cothion." The pale blue djellaba made him look like a Haradrim who had never gone to Gondor in his life. Idis wondered if she should speak to Arahaelon about recruiting Cothion to the intelligence services.

They stopped by Thor's desk. "We are going shopping," Idis said. "We will not be long."

Thor handed the bronze paper knife to Cothion, where it had been lying on his desk. "Here, stick that in your belt, just in case."

She garbed herself in her black robe, and they set out. Beyazim was far more crowded than usual, and officials were putting up blue banners on main roads in preparation for tomorrow's festival.

Idis took Cothion past the fruit stalls.

"For some reason, I love looking at fruit in other places," said Cothion shyly.

"So do I!" said Idis. "I found several new fruits in Qarshoom."

They pushed through the crowds to visit Idis's favourite spice merchant. The spice merchant beamed. "Is this your husband?"

"No, I am her husband's trusted servant," said Cothion uncomfortably, hunching over. He turned to Idis, his gaze lowered. "May I get some star anise and cinnamon for my parents, mistress?"

"That is why I brought you here." Idis watched with satisfaction as Cothion haggled for his spices.

"She is a kind mistress," said the merchant.

"They are both kind," said Cothion. "I am lucky."

As Idis walked out of the shop door, she froze. "Wait, I see the dangerous man from Khand." Something in Kharssian-ul-Khut's hawkish angular face sparked alarm. "We will follow him."

"In this crowd? And is this safe?" said Cothion, but he followed her nonetheless.

Idis's height and long stride was a distinct advantage as she attempted to keep her eyes on Kharssian-ul-Khut. "Down there!" Cothion was struggling to keep up as he pushed through the crowds behind her, but Idis could not pause lest she lose sight of the Khandian.

Suddenly Kharssian-ul-Khut ducked down an alleyway in the first circle. Idis followed swiftly and looked back to catch Cothion's eye, in the hope that he could see where she was going. Then she hurried to the end of the alley and looked to see where Kharssian-ul-Khut had gone. She could not immediately see him. Suddenly she felt an arm grip her from behind, and a cloth with something sweet-smelling was held to her face. It permeated her veil, and everything went black.

When she woke, she was lying slumped against a wall in a warehouse, her hands tied behind her back. Kharssian-ul-Khut was speaking to two other men, one short, one taller, both with plaited beards. "I do not know why she was following me," he said, "but she was. I gave her a dab of the vapour to knock her out. We cannot afford to have any trouble at this stage."

Their speech was difficult to understand: she was not nearly as fluent in Khandian as Haradric, despite Thor's tutelage.

She strained at the ropes around her arms. Her legs seemed to be unrestrained, but she still felt weak and groggy after the vapour.

One of the men poked Kharssian-ul-Khut. "She has woken."

"Sit her up, Nissa," said Kharssian-ul-Khut, and the shorter man pulled her upright.

Kharssian-ul-Khut drew out a knife. Idis flinched back, but he only cut off her black cloak. He stared. "Who are you? You do not look Haradric. Why were you following me?"

Idis said in Haradric, "I was simply shopping for spices. Please let me go." Meanwhile she did her best to strain her arms against the bonds. Now that she had been seated, the slightly different angle gave her more room to move.

Kharssian-ul-Khut laughed. "By the Red Eye of Sauron, do not play with me, woman. I ducked down that alley precisely to see if you would follow."

The tall man drew a curved knife and held it to her throat. "Do not lie, bitch. You will pay when Sauron returns."

Idis spoke in Westron, "Sauron is dead. Barad Dûr crumbled and lies in ruins. I have *seen* it."

The shorter man clenched his fists. "These are lies, lies! Sauron will return and his Nazgûl shall bear you off to the Houses of Lamentation."

Idis could not help it: she laughed.



"Why do you laugh?" said Kharssian-ul-Khut, and the tall man pressed the dagger closer to her throat.

Idis laughed again. She felt oddly light-headed, as if she had drunk too much mead. "My mother killed the Witch King of Angmar in the War of the Ring. She drove a sword into his ghostly head, after cutting the head off his winged steed. She says the steed smelled ghastly."

"She is a lunatic," said the shorter man. "That is the only explanation."

"If she is a harmless lunatic, we will let her go tomorrow," said Kharssian-ul-Khut. "But I think it wise to keep her here until all is ... completed. In any case, we have a meeting. Leave her here and I shall give her more vapour later."

They let go of her and she slumped back against the wall. At the other end of the room, a tall black-cloaked figure entered the warehouse. She was unable to see his face or any other distinguishing feature about him other than his height.

She kept pulling at the ropes and straining. One of her wrists felt like it was bleeding, but the blood was helping to lubricate the rope.

The black-cloaked man spoke at length to the Khandians. Then he looked in her direction and came closer. She saw the moment that he recognised her: his posture stiffened.

"You must kill her before she kills you." Idis recognised the husky high-pitched voice: it was the tall eunuch who often accompanied the Emperor.

"Kill her before she kills us?" said Kharssian-ul-Khut, incredulously. "You jest—?"

"I do not," said the eunuch. "Her death adds an uncertainty I do not like, and will likely draw in both Gondor and Rohan, but we have no option at this stage."

"Who is she?" said the shorter man, incredulously. "An assassin?"

"Nay, much more dangerous," said the eunuch. "The Lady Idis is the daughter of Faramir, Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ithilien and Éowyn, Princess of Rohan. She did not lie about the deeds of her mother."

Kharssian-ul-Khut stared at her. "We shall kill her then."

Idis had now managed to dislodge one of her knives from its sheath, and sought to open it by pressing it against the other arm, so that the spring-loaded button would be triggered. She could not quite push it against her other wrist properly.

The eunuch turned to the others. "I must go now. All is ready. Just kill the woman and we will proceed. We will dump her body in the canal tomorrow afterwards; it will add to the chaos."

Then he strode out. Idis strived mightily against her bonds as the tall man approached her with his curved knife drawn: she did not want to die now and start a war between Harad, Gondor and Rohan. Try as she might she just could not get her right arm out. She wondered if she could kick the man's feet out from under him.

Another man stepped into the warehouse. "Let her go!" he said in a Southern Harad accent. Everyone stared, Idis included, and then she realised it was Cothion.

"Who are you, now?" said the shorter man. "The Emperor of Harad?"

Cothion drew the copper knife from Qarshoom from his belt and stabbed the shorter man, several times over. "I am vengeance!" he shouted.

The tall man and Kharssian-ul-Khut left Idis, and advanced on Cothion. The shorter man was lying on the ground, bleeding and groaning, his guts hanging out. Idis could tell Cothion had no knife fighting technique at all: he had succeeded against the shorter man only on the basis of surprise and sheer willpower.

The taller man and Kharssian-ul-Khut backed Cothion into the corner. Meanwhile Idis desperately wrenched her right arm and it came free of the bonds, although her wrist was now pouring with blood. She flicked her wrist with difficulty, and the blade opened, slippery in her hand. She breathed deeply and concentrated.

Kharssian-ul-Khut looked very surprised when her dagger went into his neck. She flicked her left wrist twice, and took out her second dagger: that went into the tall man's eye when he turned around with a shout. Then she pulled out the dagger on a string around her neck and threw it at Kharssian-ul-Khut. It hit him in the gut: her aim was off.

With difficulty she made her way over to Cothion, who was now jabbing at Kharssian-ul-Khut with the short copper knife. He was bleeding from a cut to his arm. The man with the dagger in his eye had fallen; that throw had been good. Idis picked up the curved sword the short man had worn, and thrust it into Kharssian-ul-Khut's side.

Kharssian-ul-Khut wheezed and laughed. "Our plan will still succeed—" then blood poured out of his mouth and he fell to the ground.

"I killed someone." Cothion's face was grey, and his cheeks were coated with a sheen of sweat.

"It is well," said Idis, taking Cothion's arm. "They would have killed me had you not. You saved my life."

Cothion gave no sign of hearing her. "I killed someone," he said blankly, staring.

Idis bent down and retrieved her daggers, and rummaged around in Kharssian-ul-Khut's coat after wiping her daggers down on it. There was a message there. She shoved it down the front of her dress, and then said, "We have to warn the Emperor, Cothion. The man in the cloak was the Emperor's aide."

Cothion did not answer so she drew him out of the warehouse and dragged him onto the street. There he threw up noisily in the piles of rubbish. She did not feel she could leave him, so once he had finished, she kept dragging him up the hill, pushing through the crowds. As she pulled him behind her, she caught the eye of a woman staring at her. It was Soraiya, the former mistress of Lord Romdaer.

"Lady Mystery?" said Soraiya, coming to her. "Are you *hurt*?"

"It is mostly not my blood," said Idis. "Can you take this man to the Embassy of Gondor and get Lords Arahaelon and Thorongil to gain audience to the Empress Mother as a matter of urgency? It relates to the matter of which you told me."

Soraiya gave Cothion a speculative look, but poor grey-faced Cothion was oblivious.

"He is from Gondor, although he does not look it, and therefore out of bounds," said Idis.

"Who shall I say sent me?"

"My true name is Idis," said Idis. "But forgive me; I must speak to the Empress Mother." Then she handed over Cothion to Soraiya, and slowly pushed through the festive crowd up the hill. Her arms still hurt, and her legs were weak.

When she reached the Imperial Palace, the guards looked at her doubtfully. "Get away from the palace, beggar," said one.

Idis drew herself up as tall as she could. "I am Lady Idis, daughter to Faramir, Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ithilien and daughter to Éowyn, the White Lady of Rohan and of Eryn Arnem. I am kin by marriage to the Emperor and the Empress Mother. Let me in if you really want the Emperor to live forever."

"We will take you to the Courtyard of Heavenly Fountains under guard and get someone to confirm this," said the guard.

Indeed, he took her to the courtyard with the fountains, and spoke to another guard, who gave Idis a very doubtful look, but set off. Meanwhile Idis said to her guard, "Do you think I could rinse my wrists in these fountains? They are rather sore and covered in blood."

"I suppose," said the guard weakly. Clearly this was not a question for which he had a prepared answer.

Idis rinsed her lacerated wrists in the cool fountain while a peacock pranced by her and gave her a suspicious look. The water turned brown with dried blood, but the water was cooling and soothing.

Eventually the dark-skinned eunuch who had guided her on other occasions came out. She had privately dubbed him her 'favourite flunkey' because he was so precise and polite. He bowed and then pulled himself up short and stared at her. "What has happened, Hatun?"

"I need to see the Empress Mother," said Idis. "There is a threat to the life of the Emperor."

"Do you swear it, Hatun?"

"I swear it upon my honour and the honour of my family, Sir Eunuch," said Idis. She exposed her bleeding wrists: fresh blood was already seeping from the wounds. "The blood of Kings of Rohan and Stewards of Gondor runs in my veins. I would not betray them."

The eunuch looked at her closely, his brown eyes searching. "My name is Ferzil. I may come to regret this, but I trust you are honest, Hatun."

Idis turned to the guards. “My husband, Lord Thorongil, and Lord Arahaelon, the Deputy Ambassador of Gondor may come to find me. Can you tell them where I am? That I am seeing the Empress Mother?”

Ferzil led her swiftly through the palace in a more direct route than usual, to the Empress Mother’s apartments, past guards. He went inside, came back out, and then led Idis into the usual room. However, he did not withdraw as he usually did, but stood attentively in the corner.

“What happened? This eunuch says you are wounded?” The Empress Mother entered, and stared at Idis’s lacerated, bleeding wrists.

“I was captured by Khandians, but escaped my bonds,” said Idis, sinking onto the cushions. “You need to arrest the ... I cannot remember the word for it ... the man who is not a man. He is like this other man Ferzil. He is tall and fat and wears highly embroidered blue robes and he accompanies the Emperor. He was in league with the Khandians. He tried to kill me.”

The Empress Mother’s face drained to the colour of old parchment. “No. You must be mistaken, Lady Idis. I would know if he was a traitor—I would surely know?”

“I am sorry,” said Idis, tiredly. “You can call him in and ask him. Watch how he reacts when he sees me—he thinks I am dead—”

The Empress-Mother stood and spoke to Ferzil. “Eunuch, call in a retinue of soldiers, and ask the Emperor, may he live forever, to visit my rooms. Ask Chief Eunuch Bijaan to come too. We will see the truth of this matter.” Then she turned back to Idis. “If you are lying, Lady Idis, it is you who will be jailed. I do not care who your parents are or how Gondor reacts.”

Idis pulled herself up as straight as she could, and glared at the Empress Mother. “I remind you that you asked for my help and I have risked my own life.”

Ferzil rushed out, and then came back in. He glanced at Idis, his posture very tense. Idis thought he was regretting helping her.

Several soldiers came into the small room, and the leader saluted the Empress Mother. “We await your command, O Radiant One.”

“We may need to arrest Chief Eunuch Bijaan. If this occurs, I need you to ensure all the eunuchs of this house are questioned. There is a possible plot against the Emperor’s life.” Then as the soldiers moved towards Ferzil, the Empress Mother said, “Leave *that* one for now—only the ones of my house should be questioned.”

Bijaan entered the room and intoned “The Emperor, may he live for—” and then he stopped as four soldiers surrounded him and held scimitars to his neck. “What is this *outrage*, Radiant Mother?” Idis did not think he had noticed her, and she kept quiet and still.

Behind him, the Emperor whined, “Hurry up, Bijaan, announce me properly, you dolt.”

“Get in here, Beyazit, my son,” said the Empress Mother. “*Now*.”

The Emperor stepped into the room, looking very irritated, and then his mouth dropped open. “Umma, this is most ... *what* is going on?”

"I could ask the same thing," said Bijaan, in a choked voice: the scimitars were being kept close around his throat.

Idis had been sitting quietly on the pillows, but she stood up at this and pointed at Bijaan. "Celestial Emperor! That man has been plotting with Khand to assassinate you!"

The Emperor stared at Idis. "You are *covered* in blood."

"Your eunuch ordered the Khandians to kill me, Emperor." Idis bared her teeth as she turned to Chief Eunuch Bijaan and glared at him. "Your Khandians are dead. I killed them: quite a lot of this blood is theirs. They are in a warehouse in the fifth quadrant of the first level, hired by Kharssian-ul-Khut. He is among those dead, if anyone wants to verify the truth of my words. He wears a scarlet robe. I ran him through with a scimitar."

Bijaan paled, and sweat started to run from his shaven bald pate down his cheeks.

The Empress Mother stretched out her hand, her eyes glittering. "Bijaan. You would break our alliance thus?"

"Amaya," said Bijaan, his face constricting. He could not meet the Empress Mother's eyes, but turned away. "Your son has too much of his father in him. You know as well as I what happens to mad dogs—?"

The Emperor made an outraged noise. "How dare you, Chief Eunuch! I am the Emperor of Harad—!"

The Empress Mother grabbed her son's arm and stopped his protests. "Arrest Chief Eunuch Bijaan. Interrogate him. He is to be arrested on the suspicion that he has plotted to assassinate our Emperor, may he live forever. Question all other eunuchs of my household. They shall be purged."

"Amaya!" said the Chief Eunuch as he was led away. "No! I did this for the good of Harad!"

The Empress Mother looked down at the ground, her face pale. "I expected that Bijaan might try to assassinate *me*—that is the usual way of things—that Chief Eunuchs and Empress Mothers tussle for power. This is not how it should be. I did not see this, maybe because I did not tell my spies to look for it. I am a fool." She slammed her fist into her palm. "An utter fool."

Idis cocked her head. "I hear someone coming." The soldiers who had been left in the room had also heard the noise, and unsheathed their scimitars. The eunuch Ferzil, who had been standing still against the wall, went and stood in front of the Emperor and his mother, and put his feet into a fighting posture, his arms out. Idis was unsure what good this would do given that he appeared to have no weapons, but appreciated his bravery. She unsheathed her daggers.

"Umma, that foreigner is holding daggers in my presence, and they are covered in blood!" said the Emperor in shock. "Arrest her too!"

"She has taken them out to defend us," said the Empress Mother in a dull voice. "Note, she faces away from us and stands in the doorway."

Idis folded her daggers as she heard someone calling in Westron. "Idis! Idis, where are you?"

She said to the soldiers at the door, "That man is my husband. I will get him."

Then she ran out of the apartment, and saw Thor running down the garden path towards her, looking frantic, followed by some agitated and angry guards.

Thor took her in his arms. "My love, you are hurt!"

"I am well enough," said Idis, but suddenly she could barely stand up. It was as if all the urgency which had been keeping her going had drained out of her body when her husband had arrived. Thor braced his knees as she slumped.

"What have they done to you?" Thor's eyes sparkled with rage, and Idis realised he was ready to kill someone.

"We need to get back to the Emperor and the Empress Mother and protect them," said Idis, speaking in Haradric, and pushing herself up. "There has been a threat against the Emperor's life."

Arahaelon jogged up: he had been behind the guards. He also spoke in Haradric. "Peace, Thorongil. Idis, where do we need to go?"

Idis led them back into the rooms where she customarily met the Empress Mother, followed by the guards who had chased Thor. The Emperor, the Empress Mother, the four remaining soldiers and the eunuch Ferzil stared at them all as they entered.

Arahaelon bowed low. "Emperor of Harad, greetings; Empress Mother, greetings, I am Lord Arahaelon of Gondor, Deputy Ambassador to Harad. My companion is Lord Thorongil, Lady Idis's husband, and Second Trade Attaché."

Meanwhile Idis half-collapsed against her husband, and Thor lowered Idis to the floor and sat beside her, holding her tightly. Idis sighed and leaned against him, as the guards surrounded them.

"What has happened?" said Arahaelon. "Report, Lady Idis. We got a scant version from Cothion, but I think he is in shock."

Idis described how she had received information from Soraiya as to a Khandian attempt on the Emperor's life, and how they knew the person behind it was a merchant coming through Qarshoom. Then she told how they had found Kharssian-ul-Khut. Finally she explained how she had followed him earlier, and been caught. When she got to the part about the eunuch ordering her to be killed, Thor said, "It is probably lucky this man is not here. He would be dead by my hand."

"Cothion burst in after he had left, and stabbed one of the Khandians with the copper knife we got from Qarshoom. He was very brave," Idis said, "but I think he needs training in how to fight properly."

"He needs to learn to ride a horse properly too," said Arahaelon. "But he is a good lad for all that."

"What I do not understand," said the Emperor in a very quiet voice, "is *why*? Why would Bijaan do this? He was supposed to be helping me. Umma *gave* him to me for that purpose. As Umma said, the usual course is for Chief Eunuchs to depose Regency Councils and Empress Mothers. I thought he was on my side, more than any other—?"

“Do I have your permission to speak frankly, Emperor? Do you promise not to kill me if you do not like what I say?” said Idis.

“Listen to her, son,” said the Empress Mother.

The Emperor narrowed his eyes. “I suspect she will be insolent, but I will listen.”

“How did you treat Bijaan, Emperor?” asked Idis.

“What do you mean, how did I treat him? What question is that?” said the Emperor petulantly.

“I am presuming he did not treat him well,” muttered Thor in Westron into Idis’s ear.

“And yet, if what your mother tells me is true, he helped you rise to power,” said Idis. “I do not know, but I think he hated you for disrespecting him.”

“But why would he hate me?” said the Emperor. “All must love me.”

“This is the part where you must promise not to kill me,” said Idis. “When I first met you, I could not help comparing you with my youngest brother Dior, who is of a similar age to you. If Dior had behaved like I have seen you behave, my parents would have ... well ... told him off severely, and my mother would make him clean out horse stables. You behave like someone who does not think of others; a man who sees what he wants and takes it.”

“Of course. I am the Emperor of Harad, Uniter of the Emirates, Blessed of Heaven,” said the Emperor. Idis reflected that she could smash her head against a mud brick wall in Qarshoom and have more effect.

She put her head on the side. “Have you ever heard of a saying—” she paused and spoke in Westron—“‘respect must be earned, not given’?”

Thor translated it into Haradric.

“Thank you, dear,” said Idis. “I am too tired to translate idioms.”

“This is ridiculous!” The Emperor pointed at the door. “I do not have to be lectured by some foreign woman who does not know how to treat an Emperor. I command you to leave my presence before I arrest you and order you killed!”

“Sit down and be silent,” said the Empress Mother sharply. “These foreigners have perhaps saved your life.” She sighed as the Emperor stared at her, then slowly sat down. “You are very spoiled, Beyazit. It is my fault. I wish Bijaan had spoken to me rather than taking this drastic action. I knew well that he was very dissatisfied with several of your decisions to ignore his advice. You are going to have to learn to be responsible and to think beyond your own desires if you want to survive. I am not always going to be here to help you.”

“I don’t want your help, Umma!” said the Emperor. “I am sick of everyone telling me what to do—you, the Regency Council, Bijaan! I should banish you too, for your insolence!”

Idis opened her mouth to say that she thought the Emperor needed a good spanking, but Arahaelon put his hand up before she could speak. "Let us leave the Emperor to digest your words and find out the truth of this plot, Lady Idis. I think your wounds need tending."

"Truly," said Idis.

Thor helped her up, and they all bowed to the Emperor and the Empress Mother, following Arahaelon's lead.

"I will not say thank you," said the Empress Mother, "as these events have caused me distress and shocked me, but the alternative is much worse."

The eunuch Ferzil guided them out, his face sombre and downcast. "Thank you," said Idis. "I am sorry if I have shocked you too."

Startlingly, Ferzil looked up and gave her a feline smile. "For what it is worth, Lady Idis, I have never liked nor trusted Eunuch Bijaan. Now I find out why. You do not need to be sorry. I will find others who are trustworthy to help the Emperor, may he live forever, and his Radiant Mother." Then he turned and went back into the palace.

They slowly walked back to the Embassy, Thor supporting Idis. "I thought you were about to say something impolitic," Arahaelon told Idis in Westron.

"I was," said Idis. "I was going to threaten to spank the Emperor of Harad."

"I know it would have been a diplomatic disaster, and I am glad Arahaelon stopped you, but I would almost want to see that," said Thor.

"How is Cothion?" asked Idis.

"In bed," said Arahaelon. "Which is where you should be once we tend your wounds."

"I need to bathe first," Idis said.

When they got back to the Embassy, Idis's maids rushed to her and drew her off to her bedroom. There, they stripped off her bloody clothing and helped her bathe. They put salve on her bruised and lacerated wrists and bound them with bandages, and made her change into her nightgown.

Thor came in, bearing a glass of brandy. He passed her the glass then sat on the bed next to her and held her free hand tightly.

"My mood is strangely ... flat," said Idis, after taking a long sip from the glass.

Thor looked away. "I hated the thought that I would lose you—" He choked. The maids looked at each other and quietly left.

"I felt the same when you were attacked in Minas Tirith—"

"I should have been there," said Thor. "You were there for me."



"This is not over yet." Idis suddenly sat up as her words reminded her something. "I just thought of something. I took *this* off Kharssian-ul-Khat!" She brandished the letter at Thor.

Thor looked at it. "It is a ciphered letter." He skimmed it. "I wonder if we can crack this code—?"

"I do not presently feel able to," said Idis. "The liquid Kharssian-ul-Khat held to my face was not very nice. I feel drunk."

"Sleep. I will sit here and work on it," said Thor, tenderly, and kissed her.

Idis did not think she would be able to sleep; her wrists stung now that the moment of urgency had worn off, and she kept reliving throwing the daggers at the Khandians. But eventually, with Thor absent-mindedly patting her hair at intervals, she fell asleep.

When she woke up, it was dark and Thor had kindled a lantern. He had also fetched a small table from somewhere and put it in the corner of the room. He was sitting at the table scribbling, biting his bottom lip in concentration, his hair bronze-red in the lantern. He screwed up the piece of paper he was writing on, threw it on the floor, and got a new piece, muttering to himself.

Idis was reminded suddenly of when she had first seen Thor, in the Great Archives. He had been sitting at a desk reading a papyrus scroll, his hair lit by the light from a skylight. For several weeks thereafter, when he was sent down to the Archives, she would watch him, and try to pluck up the courage to speak to him.

Thor put down his pen, and stood up and stretched. Then he saw Idis was watching him. "You are awake!"

"I did not want to interrupt you. Have you broken the cipher?"

Thor frowned. "No. I have calculated the frequency of repetition of certain letters, but so far my guesses have not worked." He sighed. "It is late. I suppose I should try to sleep. How are you feeling?"

Idis sat up. "A little sore in the arms and wrists, and in need of distraction so I do not think about today."

Thor came and sat on the bed. "I was so worried—"

"I am sorry," said Idis. "When I was trying to get my arms out of the ropes, I could not bear the thought that I would not see thee again, my darling—"

To her shock, Thor's eyes were wet with tears. "I wish I had been there."

Idis hugged her husband. "It all turned out well in the end."

He got into his nightclothes, and got into bed, yawning. Idis cuddled up to him. After a while she caressed him and murmured, "Exactly how tired art thou?"

"I was half-asleep," he said, opening his eyes with a start. "But thou hast woken me up."

"Sorry," she said.

He caressed her shoulder. "Do not be sorry." As he ran his hand over her breast, she shivered, and rolled over to him. They kissed, and stripped off their nightclothes, and made love.

Afterwards, Idis held Thor, and looked at him. "That was particularly good. I mean, it is always good, but—" She shivered.

Thor smiled at her. "I shall try to replicate it next time." Then he yawned. "Sorry, now I am *really* tired."

They put their nightclothes back on, and went back to sleep.

Idis was woken early in the morning by her husband sitting up suddenly. "I have it!" he exclaimed. "It is Westron!"

"Whaaa-t?" said Idis, blearily.

Thor turned to her, a triumphant silhouette in the semi-dark. "The cipher! I was presuming that it was either Khandian or Haradric, but—it's Westron. Because—while the alphabets are the same—Khandian and Haradric are quite different. And then it gets more hard when you have to deal with dialects. So they communicate in Westron, using the local alphabet!"

Idis yawned. "That works."

Thor leaped out of bed and started scribbling. Idis rolled over and said, "Wake me up if you make a breakthrough," then fell back asleep.

She was woken later by her husband. "I was right. It was Westron!"

"What does it say?"

Thor deflated a little. "It says ... 'The gift has been placed in the conduit.'"

"What does that mean?"

"I do not know, although I have some ideas." Thor stood. "Let us take it to Arahaelon."

"I think it is the aqueduct from my reading on ceremonies of the Emperor of Harad," said Idis. "In any case, we must inform the Haradrim."

They dressed, girt themselves with swords, and roused Arahaelon. He awoke immediately when Thor shook him, and smiled shyly, almost boyishly. Then he saw Idis, and his face became serious as he sat up. "What are you two doing here?"

"Last night Idis remembered she had taken an encrypted note from the Khandian merchant." Thor shrugged. "I decrypted it."

Arahaelon yawned. "How long did it take you?"

Thor yawned too. "Quite a while. Initially I thought it was Haradric or Khandian, that was the problem. And then I realised early this morning: Westron is the common tongue even here. They communicated in Westron using the local alphabet!"

"He woke me up with a shout," said Idis, folding her arms. "And then he immediately went and started scribbling."

"It was just so satisfying to realise the key," said Thor. "Anyway, it says 'The gift has been placed in the conduit.'"

Arahaelon stretched. "I think it is something to do with the aqueduct—but let me get dressed, and we will take this to the Empress Mother."

"Yes, Idis thought of the aqueduct, but it could also be one of those canals. Or some other kind of reference." Thor blushed. "In any case, I am sorry for disturbing you in bed, my Lord."

"Out with you both while I change—" Arahaelon said grumpily, and flapped his arms.

They went and stood outside in the courtyard. "I think he was excited there for a moment," said Idis, grinning at Thor. "As anyone would be, to be woken by you."

"Hush, Idis," said Thor, blushing even more deeply. "I had not thought of that as a possibility until, well, it was too late. I should have gotten you to wake him."

Idis laughed. "I love how shy you are."

The courtyard men came trooping in, and bowed. "You are up early, Empress and *damat*," said one in Haradric.

"We are. I am glad to see you, because I have a question," said Idis, switching to Haradric. "I have a brother. He is a really big man."

"All of your brothers are huge," said Thor. "But I am guessing you mean Cirion." He stretched up and indicated a place far above his head, and then held out his arms to indicate shoulder width.

The courtyard men looked disbelieving. "Really?" said one.

"Really," said Thor.

"Anyway, Cirion has asked me to get a spider for him," said Idis. "But she must be a *large* one. And we would like a cage to transport her home. I will, of course, pay you."

"How did he come to know about our spiders?" said another.

"O, my aunt and uncle had several when we were children. He has loved them ever since, much to my mother's horror—" Idis broke off as Arahaelon came out, adjusting his jacket.

The courtyard men all bowed. "We will get a spider fit for a giant," they said, looking at each other. "Meanwhile, blessings for the day, and may the water wash away all sorrows and sustain our crops, thanks to our Celestial Emperor."

Arahaelon looked quizzical. "Who wants a spider?"

"Cirion," said Thor.

"O, he *is* a giant," said Arahaelon. "Númenórean height combined with the bulk of the Rohirrim. With a giant spider he will be even more terrifying?"

Idis wrapped her brown and gold scarf around her head and they set off up the hill to the Imperial Palace, pushing their way through the milling crowds, which were even more dense than the day before. "Cirion just loves animals. He drove Mummy and Daddy wild by bringing animals into the house when we were children. But I do believe terrifying people is also part of the appeal: that is why he has Fang."

"Is Fang at least part warg as I suspect?" said Arahaelon.

"Possibly," said Idis. "We do not really know." She beamed at Thor. "The fact that Fang liked you, and then your family, was an immediate reassurance to Cirion. He would not hear a bad word against you."

"Fang would be an excellent sheepdog," said Thor, thoughtfully. "My oldest brother has asked for some of Fang's pups. Papa and Forlong enjoyed meeting him at our wedding reception."

Arahaelon put his hand to his head. "You had a half-warg at your wedding?"

"He is *very* well behaved. He just sat under Cirion's chair," Idis said.

"Except when my Mama insisted on feeding him cheese," muttered Thor. "Fang will get fat, and then he will not be able to pull people off horses any more."

"Lucky your Mama lives in Lossarnach and will not often see him," Idis said.

They reached the palace and one of the guards at the entrance flinched. Idis recognised him from the previous day.

"You are back again?" he said.

"Yes, Deputy Ambassador Arahaelon, Lord Thorongil and Lady Idis, all from the Embassy of Gondor in Harad, to see the Empress Mother."

The guard ran off while they waited and watched the crowds below. The eunuch Ferzil came down, looking anxious. "The Empress Mother is still in bed."

"This is urgent," said Arahaelon. "It concerns the life of the Emperor."

Ferzil sighed. "You shall deal with her rage then. But I trust you beyond all doubt, after yesterday." He took them through the courtyards, into the harem, down to the Empress Mother's apartment, and into the meeting room strewn with cushions. Then he rushed out the door at the back of the meeting room.

The Empress Mother came out shortly afterwards, still clad in a dressing gown. Her face was puffy, her eyes were red, and she was not made up. Ferzil and some of the green clad women knelt by her.

“Why do you now come at this hour?”

Arahaelon bowed. “We apologise, but Lady Idis found this note on the Khandian merchant yesterday, and Lord Thorongil has stayed up half the night decrypting it.”

The Empress Mother turned to Idis. “Why did you not tell me this?” she said sharply.

“I forgot until just before bed,” said Idis. “I had other things on my mind.”

The Empress Mother looked at the note, and then at the translation. “What was the cipher?”

Thor brightened. “Well, Radiant Mother of the Emperor, I tried both Khandian and Haradric in several dialects first, but that did not work, and then I woke up early this morning, and realised it was actually Westron words written in Haradric script—it truly is the Common Tongue, so once I knew that it was much easier to work out the frequency—”

The Empress Mother stared at him. “How many hours did this take?”

Thor shrugged. “I do not know.” He yawned and put his hand over his mouth. “I do beg your pardon.”

“Maybe you can show it to the Chief Eunuch, Empress Mother, and ask him what it means,” said Arahaelon.

The Empress Mother turned her face away. “Bijaan is dead. We spoke yesterday, and then at the end of our conversation, he bit on a capsule of poison he had concealed at the back of his mouth—”

“O, horse’s balls,” said Idis in Rohirric.

“We are thinking the conduit is the aqueduct,” said Arahaelon. “But you may have different ideas?”

“I have never seen the ceremony up close,” said Thor. “But Idis read of it when preparing to meet you, Empress Mother.”

The Empress Mother tapped her chin. “We need to tell the Emperor.”

Ferzil spoke from the corner. “Shall I arrange for the Emperor, may he live forever, to come, Radiant Mother? Perhaps we can all meet in the Hall of Mirrors?”

“Yes, thank you, that would be convenient. Please wait outside for me to change—”

They trooped out into the corridor, and Ferzil rushed off. They were taken by another servant to an ornate room all in gold with great plate glass mirrors all over the walls and ceiling.

“This is disorienting,” said Thor, looking up at their reflections.

“Maybe that is the point?” said Arahaelon.

The Emperor entered, accompanied by several other bearded men, and Idis, Arahaelon and Thor prostrated themselves on the floor with the bearded men. "You may rise," said the Emperor, then sat at the head of the table. No one else sat, and so they did not sit either.

Then the Empress Mother entered, now dressed and immaculately made-up, followed by Ferzil and two other eunuchs, and they bowed, and she sat, and everyone else sat. Ferzil and the other eunuchs knelt on the floor. Arahaelon, Idis and Thor finally sat, and Arahaelon passed across the ciphered message and Thor's decrypted version.

"Who translated this?" said the Emperor.

"It was me, Emperor," said Thor, and outlined the process he had undergone to crack the encryption.

The Emperor stared at him. "That must have taken some time?"

"It did; he was awake half of the night," said Idis.

"What do you think the conduit is?" said Arahaelon. "We are thinking the aqueduct—"

The bearded men conferred. "We think the same," said one of them.

The Emperor clicked his fingers. "Get someone to check the aqueduct. Meanwhile I shall get ready for the ceremony."

"You cannot possibly undertake the ceremony in these circumstances, my son," said the Empress Mother, her voice shrill.

"The people expect it of me," said the Emperor. "I would fail them if I did not undertake the ceremony. I have the Blessings of Heaven. Would the waters dry up if I do not do it?"

Some liveried servants ran off, and the Emperor stood. "I will dress for the ceremony. You may all leave now. Get out." He made a disrespectful shooing gesture at Idis, Thor and Arahaelon.

"Let us go back to the Embassy," said Arahaelon quietly to Thor and Idis. "We have done what we can do."

They bowed to the Emperor and a different eunuch led them back out of the palace.

"It is still better to have that person in control than to have no one at all," said Arahaelon very quietly, in Westron once they were a fair distance away from the Palace. "At least, I think it is."

"I think it is too," said Idis. "But this is what the Chief Eunuch must have been struggling with."

"I would like to see the ceremony but I am too tired," said Thor, and yawned hugely.

"I think you both need to sleep," said Arahaelon. "I will go to the ceremony, and take Cothion and Bergon."

When they got back to the Embassy, Thor was almost shambling, and walked into a wall. "How much sleep did you have?" Idis asked him

“Not much,” admitted Thor.

“How are your arms?” Arahaelon asked Idis.

“Sore today,” said Idis. “Sorer than yesterday.”

“It is strange how wounds are like that,” said Arahaelon. He crossed his arms and glared at Idis and Thor. “You must go to bed now. I will not be satisfied until you do.”

Idis dragged Thor into their bedroom, and he lay down, fully clad, on the bed. Arahaelon glared at them again, and left.

“I think Ara—” Idis said to Thor, and then she realised he had already fallen asleep. He looked very sweet with his mouth partly open. She really wanted to kiss his cheek but she did not want to wake him.

Instead, she changed quietly into her bed clothes, and sat next to him, watching him. The maids looked in quizzically.

Idis went to the door. “Thor has been awake most of the night working on something,” she whispered. “Arahaelon has commanded him to sleep.”

Idis read a book by the window, and then lay down for a time and drowsed. Then she woke again her maids quietly bathed her and got her dressed. She went out into the courtyard. She wrote a quick letter to Soraiya to thank her for her help, checked on Cothion, and then went to talk to the guards.

“Has there been any trouble with the festival today?” she said.

The tall guard, whom Idis privately called ‘Tirien’s lover’ in her head, looked at her doubtfully. “Nay, my Lady, and I think Tirien will ask to talk to you in the next two days.”

The other guard laughed. “Making an honest woman out of her then?”

The tall guard blushed. “Well ... yes ...”

Idis smiled. “Good to hear on all counts.”

“You did not go to the festival, my Lady?” said the shorter guard.

“My husband was up most of the night working on something,” said Idis, and yawned. “I slept, but not as well as I ought.”

“Is it true you killed three Khandians, yesterday, my Lady?” said the taller guard.

“Only two,” said Idis. “And it was in self-defence.”

The shorter guard laughed. “Remind me not to get on your bad side.”

Idis stood with them for a while and watched the crowd.

"Is there someone in particular you are looking for, my Lady?" said the taller guard.

"I am looking for mayhem and riots," said Idis. "I do not see any yet, so that is heartening."

The two guards stared at her. "We shall take that under advisement," said the shorter guard, and straightened his posture.

When she went back in, the courtyard men brandished a large woven cage, and showed her the mechanism for opening the cage. "For the wonderful spider we shall get, your Highness," they said.

"That spider cage is marvellous," said Idis. "My brother shall love it."

"Your brother is not really as large as the *damat* said, is he?" said one of the men.

"Yes," said Idis. "My parents are very tall. I am the same height as my mother, and my father is this tall." She indicated with her hand.

"Ah that explains it," said another man. "It is like when you breed red-striped spiders with red-striped spiders: they mostly come out red-striped."

Idis wandered around and around the courtyard, and then tried to read a book.

Haldir looked at her. "What is wrong?"

"I slept very badly," said Idis. "But I cannot sleep. Thor was awake almost all night and now he is in bed snoring."

"Poke him in the ear," suggested Haldir. "Why was he awake all night?"

"He had to translate something," said Idis, tapping her feet on the floor.

"You are making me anxious, my Lady, with the pacing and the foot-tapping," said Haldir.

Idis got up. "I will check on Thor again, and maybe poke him in the ear."

"Is it true you killed four Khandians?" said Haldir.

Idis sighed. "The number seems to be growing. *Two*. In self-defence." She went back into her rooms. Thor was still snoring.

She lay beside him for a time, and finally rolled him onto his side, whereupon he struggled and said, "No, I do not like that, Mama," all with his eyes closed.

Then suddenly she fell asleep, most unexpectedly. She was woken by a sharp knock on the door, and leapt up.

Thor sat up too, looking totally disoriented and quite adorable, like a lost child. Idis opened the door. It was Arahaelon.

"Nothing happened," he said. "At least, the ceremony occurred, and the Emperor walked away, still apparently alive."



"That is an anti-climax," said Thor, yawning.

"Anti-climaxes are good," said Arahaelon. "They are *very* good. I want more of them in my life."

"I think I need to get up so that I will be able to sleep tonight," said Thor. "I cannot promise that I can do anything very useful today, however."

"That is no problem," said Arahaelon. "You have already done enough. Please do not go back to your desks."

Thor splashed water on his face, and then they went and sat on a stone chair in the cloistered walkway around the courtyard. Thor leaned his head on Idis's shoulder, and she held his hand, and he patted her hand with his thumb. She kissed his head: it reminded her of when Thor had been in the Houses of Healing and they had sat in the Gardens together.

Lady Nidhien came out looking purposeful, and then stopped and stared at them. "What happened?"

"We are tired," said Idis. "Nothing happened."

"I have never seen you two this affectionate before," said Nidhien.

"We are too exhausted to bother being discreet today." Thor grinned. "You were not at our duels; we were *very* affectionate after our first duel—"

Nidhien walked off, shaking her head.

"This Embassy is so odd," said Idis, wondering what Nidhien's question had been aimed at.

"I tried not to think about it too hard until you came along," said Thor.

Idis laughed at him. "That is very typical. 'If I just work very hard and pretend none of this is happening, it might go away'—"

"Basically." Thor sat up as brazen trumpets sounded outside. One of the guards came in, looking very anxious. "There is some kind of messenger from the Emperor of Harad outside in a fancy costume."

"Get Arahaelon and Romdaer," said Thor, and then they stood and went out to the entrance.

The messenger looked at them. "Lady Idis, daughter of Faramir Prince of Ithilien and Steward of Gondor of the House of Húrin, and Lady Éowyn of Eryn Arnem, formerly Lady of Rohan of the House of Eorl, and her *damat*?"

"Yes?" said Idis.

"You and others who assisted you have been called to an audience before the Emperor in two days hence."

"You may tell the Emperor that we are able to come," said Idis. "I will send a list of who comes tomorrow."

The messenger looked shocked. "It is not an invitation, but a command!"

"We are subjects of the King of Gondor and Arnor; however, you may tell the Emperor that we choose to listen to his command upon this occasion," said Thor.

Idis looked at him. "I am supposed to be the blunt one."

"Sometimes it is best to make one's position very clear," said Thor, smiling gently.

Arahaelon and Romdaer came out just as the trumpeters were blowing a farewell fanfare.

"I missed it," said Romdaer sadly.

"We have been invited to an Imperial audience two days hence," said Idis. "I think Arahaelon should come too, along with Cothion."

"Nay, not invited—*commanded*—but we are nonetheless treating it as an invite," said Thor, and Arahaelon lifted an eyebrow.

"Thor is in a forthright mood today," said Idis, as they went back into the compound.

"Thorongil is never in a forthright mood," said Romdaer, with surprise.

"Surely we should the Ambassador in our number too?" said Arahaelon.

"The invite was for people who *assisted* us," said Thor, and Idis and the others stared at him.

Arahaelon grimaced. "I do not think I have ever seen you in this mood before, Thorongil."

"I like to keep you all confused," said Thor, making a silly face.

"I think you need more sleep," said Idis.

"My wife almost being killed—and certain people not really caring about this—may contribute to my mood," said Thor, darkly. "It shall not be forgiven. Ever."

"I think we will have our dinner in our room and go to bed early," said Idis.

She took Thor back to their room, and they looked at the clothing they had and assessed whether it was suitable for an Imperial audience. "I think I shall just have to wear the green dress again," said Idis to the maids.

"No, I would wear the blue silk one," said Feriadis. Tirien was very quiet and subdued.

"Are you well, Tirien?" said Idis. Feriadis and Tirien looked at each other, and then looked at Thor.

Idis gleaned from this that they were awkward around her husband. "Can you stand out in the corridor for a moment, Thor?"

After he had left, Tirien said, "I do not really want to explain, Lady Idis."

"Your beau said you had something to tell me, and the other guard said he was going to make an honest woman out of you," said Idis.

Tirien blushed bright red. "Yes, so Bronion and I are going to get married, ah, because—"

"—she is pregnant," said Feriadis, shaking her head.

To her shame, Idis had a moment of shock combined with terrible jealousy, so intense that she could barely think. She was not entirely sure what expression was on her face.

"Well, congratulations, I hope, Tirien," she said, and tried to smile, although her face felt a little stiff. "He seems like a pleasant man."

Tirien had tears in her eyes. "I did not want to tell you, my Lady, because here I am, not even really wanting this right now, and I know you wanted that baby you lost, and I am really sorry—"

Idis closed her eyes so that Tirien would not see the tears in her eyes too, and then embraced her maid. "Thank you for thinking of me. And I hope you are both happy in the long run, even if this was not what you planned."

Feriadis snorted. "Bronion is more excited than Tirien about the child. He is delighted—"

"That is because he does not have to birth it," said Tirien, looking nervous.

"We will go home to Gondor, and I will make sure you get a good midwife," said Idis. "I will pay for proper care at the Houses for you, or you can go to Eryn Arnem and some of Mummy's women can look after you."

Tirien bawled on her shoulder. "You are better to me than I deserve, my Lady."

"These things happen," said Idis. "Can I call Thor back in? And we are going to eat dinner in here tonight, because he needs to go to bed as soon he has eaten, so if someone can fetch us meals from the kitchen, that would be appreciated."

Thor came back in, and the maids disappeared: Idis presumed Tirien was going to talk to the guard, and Feriadis was fetching dinner.

"What was that about?" said Thor.

"Tirien is pregnant. She is going to marry that guard."

Thor looked at her. "Ah. And, well, what is your feeling about this?"

"I am trying really hard to be happy for her," said Idis. "Please do not ask any more or I will cry."

They sat on the bed in silence until Feriadis came back with meals on a tray. "Just leave the plates outside the door on the tray when you are finished and I will take them back to the kitchen," she said.

They laid out their meals on the desk and sat on each end of it. "This is much better than what they usually cook," said Thor as they ate. "We should do this all the time."

"The Ambassador demands they cook food of Gondor and they are not very good at it," said Idis. "Which is understandable because they have presumably neither seen nor eaten food from Gondor?"

"I want Arahaelon to be the Ambassador," said Thor, with his jaw set. "I am going to suggest it to your father. I will be unable to work with Galador again. The man is a dotard."

"You take a long time to come to a decision, but when you make up your mind, you are very determined," said Idis.

"That is mostly the case, but it is not always true," said Thor, pushing his plate away.

"How so?" asked Idis, picking up the plates and putting them on the tray.

He took the tray off her, put it outside the door, and then pulled the door closed again. "I made up my mind about you the first moment I saw you."

"Bed time," said Idis. "You look tired." Thor had purple hollows under his eyes.

"What do you think is going to happen during the audience with the Emperor?" asked Thor as they were changing into their nightgowns.

"I do not know, but I want to finish this first visit to Harad on a positive note."

"We only have two weeks to go," said Thor. "It is always strange going home; you will find it takes a week or two to adjust."

"O no, several weeks' journey with Bergon," said Idis, as they got into bed.

Thor laughed. "In fact, he is a pleasant travelling companion. It is strange how some people are quite different in different contexts."

"We have to remember to the spider for Cirion," said Idis. "I have tasked the courtyard men with finding one."

"I shall get silk for all my female relatives and sisters-in-law. Would your sisters like silk, do you think? And this time, I shall order some plate glass for Papa for his greenhouse—"

"You are so sweet. My sisters do not need silk."

"I like giving people presents," said Thor. "When I was a little boy, Mama would send me down to the stationers to get ink. And when I came home, I would have bought not only the ink, but spent all the money on all kinds of things for everyone in the family, which was apparently a little vexing for her, but she did not want to tell me off."

Idis snuggled up to Thor, and then looked at him with surprise. "O, you seem to be—"

“For some reason, the more tired I am, the more excited that part of me is.”

Idis propped herself up on her elbow. “Not *that* tired, however?”

Thor smiled. “No. I still have some energy, thou might be interested to hear?”

Afterwards, Idis fell asleep almost instantly. She woke up later in the middle of the night with a shock to find herself unclothed, and put her nightgown back on.

The next morning, Thor looked a lot better. The purple hollows under his eyes were less pronounced, and he was yawning less. “Your arms are healing too,” he said, inspecting them carefully.

When they went to breakfast, Cothion was back. He looked at them shyly. “My Lord, my Lady.”

Idis sensed Cothion would be embarrassed if she embraced him, so she bowed. “Thank you for saving my life, Cothion.”

Cothion turned bright red. “You do not need to bow to me! It was the least I could do!”

“I, too, am immensely grateful,” said Thor. “But we think you need some training in how to fight—”

“When you get back to Minas Tirith, I will put you in touch with my brother,” said Idis.

“Which one?” said Thor.

“Cirion, of course,” said Idis.

Thor winced. “Cirion is a man-mountain. He may squash Cothion. He would squash me. Would not Dior be better? He is closer to Cothion’s size and age.”

“But Cirion is very encouraging and an excellent trainer,” said Idis.

Cothion stared at her. “You do mean ... the Captain-General ...?”

“The same,” said Thor. “Personally I think someone else would be better, but I shall think on it before you come home. Also, before I forget, your presence is also required for an audience with the Emperor tomorrow, so if you have good clothes, get them out, and get the laundry to get them ready.”

“This is all just too much,” said Cothion.

“It is not usually like this,” said Thor, reassuringly. “I went for three years without seeing the Emperor at all. I do not think I even got anywhere near him.”

“Who was that strange woman who took me back to the Embassy, Lady Idis?” said Cothion.

“She is a courtesan,” said Idis.

Cothion choked on his bread. “Why are you acquainted with a Haradric courtesan, my Lady?”

"I met her on my wanders around the City. I like her; I shall visit her again before I leave," said Idis.

"She asked me who your mother was, and I said Lady Éowyn of Rohan, and she *swore*," said Cothion with great disapproval.

Idis laughed. "My mother has that effect on people, even from afar."

They spent the day preparing for the Imperial audience. To Thor's dismay, Arahaelon asked Galador if he would like to come, but they were relieved when Galador said no.

Idis decided to visit Nidhien. Nidhien looked up at her sharply. "Have you come to gloat that you have married someone whom you love, Lady Idis? I could see it in your faces yesterday—Galador and I had thought it was a marriage of convenience—but clearly we were wrong—"

"No," said Idis. "I have instead come to ask about the health of your husband. Thor and I are ... concerned ... that he has lost interest."

Nidhien looked around and then lowered her voice. "He made the decision several weeks ago that he is going to retire. It is since that time that he has lost all care—"

"Well, I am pleased for your sake that you will finally leave this place," said Idis. "Indeed, I think it is a good decision for him as well."

"Are you well after your ordeal?" said Nidhien.

"Much better today, thank you," said Idis, trying to conceal her surprise. "It was most unpleasant—"

"What does it feel like to kill someone?" said Nidhien.

Idis stared at her. "I have only killed six or seven people, including the two I killed the other day. I always feel guilt; I had difficulty sleeping afterwards—thus I am my father's child in this regard, more than my mother's. Mummy would say that they were bad men and they got what they deserved for trying to kill me first."

She closed her eyes for a moment as the *thunk* of the dagger hitting the Khandian in the eye came to her again.

"Yet you did not hesitate?"

"No. I was just—I wanted to save my own life, and Cothion's, and stop a war between Harad and Gondor, and I did what it took to achieve that." Idis paused. "My father laid down a rule that we only kill in self-defence or defence of others, because he says it scars your soul."

"Yet he must have killed hundreds?"

"Yes. He and Mummy both have nightmares about the War, even now."

"Interesting," said Nidhien.

"I would not recommend killing anyone unless you absolutely had to," said Idis, looking Nidhien in the eyes, and trying to replicate her father's gaze.

"O, I was not planning to," said Nidhien, looking frankly at Idis. "I was just curious."

Idis stood. "Thank you for explaining the situation with your husband, Lady Nidhien. Do take care of yourself, and remind yourself that it will not be long before you are in the homewards straight."

That night she whispered to Thor, "I think Nidhien seriously considered murdering Galador—"

Thor had been drowsing but he rolled over. "What?!"

"I do not think she will, because she told me Galador is about to announce his retirement, and they will go home, but we had a very strange conversation about what it feels like to kill someone, and I told her it was not worth trying."

"By *Ea*, I could not kill anyone in cold blood," said Thor. "Killing someone in the heat of battle is bad enough, as I know well. I mean, that is what horrified me about the poisoning and the assassins: how can they look at someone and know they plan to kill them without warning? It is dishonourable."

Idis laughed at him. "You are such a Númenórean, my darling. Mind you, the Rohirrim would also think killing someone in cold blood is utterly wrong. I wonder why Khandians are different?"

"Because they think they are right?" said Thor. "They think they are doing the bidding of their Dark Lord. But they are not, because the Dark Lord has been vanquished and does not exist, so it is just—them."

"Although Sauron is vanquished, evil deeds still flourish," said Idis.

"Exactly," said Thor. "But evil is here, not in Barad Dûr." He put his hand over his chest.

"That is the hard part: how do you know that you are doing the right thing? I am sure that Bijaan the eunuch thought he was doing the right thing by killing the Emperor, just as we thought we were doing the right thing by saving him. How can we know what is right, Thor?"

"That eunuch should have talked to the Emperor, even at risk of his own life, to try to get the Emperor to understand why it is necessary to behave like a better person," said Thor. "King Elessar would not be assassinated by one of his closest aides, ever—"

"The equivalent is Daddy poisoning Aragorn," said Idis, with dawning horror.

"Unimaginable," said Thor. "Utterly unimaginable."

"We should sleep," said Idis.

The next morning, they rose early, ate a quick breakfast, and Idis's maids came in to get her ready. Tirien had to sit down at intervals because she felt unwell, which made Feriadis shake her head disapprovingly.

"Formal events are much easier for men," said Thor, watching Idis dress. He looked uncomfortable and stiff in his best suit. "I mean, I hate wearing this, but it is much less fuss than dresses and things like that. Shall I go get the jewellery?"

"You should put on that brooch shaped like an eagle that Mummy loaned you," said Idis.

"Must I?" said Thor. "I suppose we must look our best for the Haradrim, but it seems a little gaudy."

"By the Valar, I really did marry someone who thinks exactly like my father," sighed Idis. "It is disturbing. Just wear the brooch, Thorongil."

Thor grinned and saluted her. "I know I am in trouble when you call me that." Then he dashed off, and came back bearing several glittering necklaces and earrings. "I cannot tell the difference between these, so I brought them all."

Idis snorted. "Put on the brooch, and put the jewellery down here."

Finally they were ready, and emerged out into the courtyard. The courtyard men prostrated themselves again, and Idis put her hand to her head in dismay. Arahaelon and Cothion emerged shortly thereafter. All of the others had come out to watch, other than Galador and Nidhien.

They climbed into the palanquin, and Arahaelon said, "I hate these things with a passion."

"Me too," said Idis.

After they were halfway up the hill, Thor said, "I am beginning to understand the dislike. I feel seasick, although I do not feel seasick in boats."

"I cannot believe I am in a palanquin going to the Emperor," said Cothion in a quivering voice. "My Baba is not going to believe me."

When they got to the Imperial Palace, Cothion's eyes were like saucers as he looked around the courtyard with the pristine marble fountains and peafowl. "What happens if the peacocks do business on the marble?"

Idis laughed as a mother peahen dashed past, followed by a string of tiny peachicks. "It is likely an army of slaves keeps it clean, Cothion. I have not really thought of that before."

The eunuch Ferzil came down, and looked at her and the others anxiously. "I am afraid I will have to ask these Lords to divest themselves of their swords, and, well, if anyone has any knives—"

"I have no knives today," said Idis. "You can get a woman to check if you would like. But I swear upon the honour of my House." She rolled up her sleeves.

Thor and Arahaelon unbuckled their swords; Cothion did not have one as he was not noble.

They were led to the throne room Idis had visited on her first time in the Imperial Palace.

They approached and prostrated themselves in the same way that Idis had the first time. Idis went first, followed by Thor, then Arahaelon and Cothion.

The Emperor said sulkily, "You can sit up and look at me, I suppose, as you did save my life."

Idis and the others sat up, still kneeling.



The Empress Mother stepped forward, veiled again. "We inspected the aqueduct. There was a container within: the lid would have come off when the Emperor, may he live for ever, opened the sluice. And he would have taken the first drought of the water. We fed the contents of the container to a slave, who died swiftly. The poison was colourless, odourless and would not have been easily detected."

Idis drew in her breath. "May I speak?" When the Emperor nodded, she said, "So—even though the conspirators were dead, the plot still lived?"

"Precisely," said the Empress Mother, her grey eyes bleak as stone in the crack in her veil.

"I am glad that I stayed up all night to crack that cipher, then," said Thor quietly.

"You chose a useful *damat*," said the Empress Mother to Idis.

The Emperor shifted on his throne and pointed at Cothion. "Surely one of these men is from Harad?"

Cothion's voice cracked a little. "May I speak?" When the Emperor nodded, he said, "My father is from Harad, my mother is from Gondor, and they live in Minas Tirith, where my siblings and I were born."

"Why did your father leave?" said the Emperor, suspiciously.

"He is from the small town of Karaz, near Qarshoom—" started Cothion.

The Emperor barked with laughter. "Say no more. I understand exactly why he left."

They sat in silence, and then the Emperor suddenly looked younger. "What should I do to avoid people trying to assassinate me in the future?"

"Can I speak frankly?" said Thor. Idis and Arahaelon made alarmed eye-contact and Idis went to grab Thor's arm. She recognised the tone in her husband's voice.

"You may speak, *damat*. If your wife is trying to stop you, you must be going to say something interesting," observed the Emperor.

"I was thinking last night. No close adviser to King Elessar would ever try to assassinate him," said Thor. "In fact, the closest analogy would be Idis's father attempting to poison the King, which is simply unimaginable."

"Why is it unimaginable?" said the Emperor.

"My father is just—not like that," said Idis. "Also, Aragorn had no siblings and my father lost his older brother in the War. They regard each other as kin—"

"Regarding one another as kin does not stop you from rivalry," said the Empress Mother, dryly. "Not at all."

"King Elessar does not make us prostrate ourselves," said Thor. "We do not fear that he will kill us."

"He is weak, then," said the Emperor, with contempt.

Thor smiled, and Idis's heart sank at the look in her husband's eye. "Did you know, Emperor of Harad, that I was a soldier in the Army of Gondor, and fought against Harad for seven years. That is where I learned to speak your tongue: from the Haradrim who were our prisoners of war. I questioned them."

Arahaelon looked like he wanted the earth to swallow him up, or alternatively like he wanted to strangle Thor.

The Emperor stared at Thor suspiciously. "I did not know that, *damat*. This is where you learned to duel with a sword, also?"

"Yes, although I have been trained since boyhood, of course. I simply honed my technique," said Thor, with a slight smile. "And who won that war?"

"Gondor," said the Emperor, sulkily, while the Empress Mother glared at Thor.

"King Elessar is not weak," said Thor. "One of the reasons we do not wish to assassinate him is because we honour him. He brought our nation together after war. He fed the poor. He protected us from Umbarian pirates, and yes, Haradric border raiders. He set up schools so that people like Cothion could be educated. He is not perfect, but he tries his best, and he listens to his people. That is what Idis meant when she said 'Respect is earned, not given'. He earned the respect of his people by looking after them. He is harsh when he needs to be, but not otherwise."

The Emperor's face was closed. "He is weak."

"You would never think he was weak, if you met him. He is forbidding and grim at times."

"You have met him?" said the Emperor.

Thor smiled at Idis. "He officiated our wedding, as it happens." Behind them, Cothion choked.

"That is enough, *damat*," said the Empress Mother.

"That is well, because it is all I have to say," said Thor. "I would never presume to tell the Celestial Emperor of Harad, may he live forever, to do anything. It is not my place. I simply convey my humble and unworthy thoughts on why such a thing has not happened to King Elessar, which you are welcome to disregard."

"You have a clever tongue," said the Emperor. "I distrust it."

"I am a diplomat of Gondor; there is no reason why you should trust me, apart from the fact that the four of us have just helped save your life," said Thor. "Gondor would prefer Harad not to fall. But ultimately, the choice is yours, Celestial Emperor."

The Emperor flung a leg sulkily over the throne. "Hmph. I do not know if I feel like giving you a gift after all."

"We do not require gifts," said Arahaelon quickly.

"Do not be ungrateful, son," said the Empress Mother. She shook her head and clicked her fingers. "Bring out the gifts."

Slaves emerged, bearing boxes which were placed before each of them. When Idis turned to glance at Cothion, he looked like he was going to faint.

"We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for these princely gifts, Celestial Emperor, Blessed of Heaven, Uniter of the Emirates, may you live forever," said Arahaelon. "I also note that Lord Thorongil may have spoken more bluntly than he intended because his wife's life was threatened by the Khandians. He has been quite out of sorts and not in his usual state since—"

"Well I am pleased he sat up through the night and worked out that strange language," said the Emperor. "I will forgive him this time, although the next time I will not be so lenient. You may leave my presence."

They were led back out, carrying the boxes, which were surprisingly heavy. Arahaelon glared at Thor, who just glanced at him with limpid green eyes. They did not say anything until the palanquin was halfway down the hill.

"Thorongil, what did you think you were doing?" growled Arahaelon.

"Gently pointing out some truths," said Thor. "I formulated what I would say last night. He will not listen today, but I hope that maybe some of it will come back to him later."

"You could have gotten us all killed," said Arahaelon.

"I was banking on the hope that even he is not headstrong enough to start a war with Gondor by killing its diplomats. But that is why I thought I might remind him that we win every war we fight against them—" said Thor, with satisfaction.

"You are utterly unrepentant!" said Arahaelon, grinding his teeth.

"I am," said Thor. "Idis and I were talking last night about whether we had done well or ill by saving the Emperor. And then I realised that it could be a good thing—if he learned from it."

Cothion had been silent, but he said, "He was not what I imagined an Emperor to be. I do not know how I am going to break this to my Baba."

When they got back to the Embassy, Arahaelon stormed back into his office and slammed the door.

"Lord Arahaelon is scary," said Cothion.

"His bark is worst than his bite," said Thor. "However, I think I may avoid him for a few days until he cools down. Let us change back into reasonable clothing, Idis dear."

They got out of their fancy clothing, and went back to the office.

Haldir looked at them curiously. "What annoyed Arahaelon? He is swearing continuously in five different languages."

Thor shrugged. "Not what: who. I annoyed him." He wandered off to his desk around the corner with his hands in his pockets.

Bergon said, "I hate to think—"

Idis started to giggle. "Thor told the Emperor of Harad that King Elessar was better than him."

"Lord Thorongil was right in what he said," said Cothion loyally. "The Emperor would do well to listen."

Bergon smacked his forehead. "By the Valar, Thor told the Emperor of Harad he was a naughty boy, and you all still live?"

"That is why Arahaelon is angry," said Idis. "Also Thor did not warn us of what he was going to say. I should have realised what was going on in his mind from the tenor of my conversation with him last night. Apparently he had it all planned."

"He does not really think like other people, does he?" said Bergon.

"No," said Idis. "But then nor do I, so I was lucky to find him."

"I think I am going to be sick at how sweet that is," said Bergon, and Idis threw a screwed up bit of paper at him.

"Ten more days of us enduring each other," she said to Bergon.

Bergon laughed. "I am counting down the moments until we leave, Lady Idis."

Unlike Bergon, Idis felt sad she was leaving. She went to see her favourite spice merchant.

"That Khandian ended up dead," said the spice merchant. "The one you asked me about? They found him stabbed in his warehouse, and two of his men—robbed maybe?"

"Yes, I heard as much," said Idis. "In any case, my husband and I are leaving soon. But we will be back, although I am not sure when." She was very touched when the spice merchant gave her some threads of saffron.

Then she visited Soraiya. When the slave led her up to the lounge, Soraiya said, "You are a Princess! You did not tell me you were a Princess! *You* were the one who was friends with the Empress Mother?"

"I am not a princess," said Idis. "My mother is married to a Prince of Gondor, that is all."

"I would call that a Princess. And my, isn't that husband of yours *pretty*?" observed Soraiya, as the slave poured the *café*. "Except he went *insane* when I told him that you were injured, and then I was scared of him."

"Thor has been a little anxious since then, but I hope he will calm down," said Idis. "I killed the Khandians, by the way, before they could kill me, so you need not fear them."

"What exactly *are* you?" said Soraiya.

“Just a woman, trying to make her way the best she can in the world,” said Idis.

“That goes for us both,” said Soraiya. “I actually ... like you, Lady Mystery.”

“I am still embarrassed by that stupid name,” said Idis. “We will go back to Gondor shortly, but I will visit next time to see how you are.” She put a pouch of coins on the table. “A gift to thank you.”

“Thank you,” said Soraiya, laughing. “Now I like you even more.”

A week before they were due to leave, to Idis and Thor’s great relief, Galador announced his impending retirement and said that Arahaelon would be Acting Ambassador and Romdaer would be Acting Deputy Ambassador. Everyone clapped politely.

Finally, Idis had a meeting with the Empress Mother, two days before they planned to depart. A different eunuch led her to the Empress Mother’s rooms. Idis was disappointed that her favourite eunuch flunkey Ferzil was not there, and hoped he had not been punished for helping her.

However, when she got to the Empress Mother’s rooms, Ferzil was waiting. Idis sighed with relief. “I am glad to see you—!” Then she stopped and stared. Ferzil was now garbed in a much more elaborate dark blue silk outfit covered with gold embroidery like the one Bijaan had worn, rather than the plain blue one he had previously worn.

Ferzil bowed low, a glint of triumph in his brown eyes. “You may call me Chief Eunuch Ferzil, Hatun. It seems that I chose wisely when I decided to trust you. I now serve the Radiant Mother.”

“I am glad,” said Idis.

“Well, that was an interesting audience with the Emperor, may he live forever,” said the Empress Mother, once Ferzil had left them. “I thought that older grumpy man was going to kill your *damat*. If he could have achieved it with his glare he would have. But I am grateful for your help. To lose my only child would have killed me, and destroyed our realm.”

“Arahaelon has calmed down now, but it did take a day or two. And thank you for the jade.”

“By the way, tell your husband that my brother Darius is getting married in three weeks.” The Empress Mother frowned sadly. “Unfortunately I cannot go. Not after ... what happened. I cannot leave Beyazit.”

“That was a quick engagement?” said Idis.

“His wife is older than is typical for Haradric brides: she is twenty eight. But everyone says she is very pleasant, and she is happy to go to Rohan—that is where Darius will be posted next.”

“O, excellent!” said Idis with excitement. “I’ll tell my Uncle and cousins to look out for him.”

“Thank you,” said the Empress Mother, as the maid poured the *café*.

Idis took a sip of the *café* then tried to suppress a grimace. It tasted very odd to her: bitter and vile. She put the cup down and fiddled with it.

The Empress Mother watched her. "What is wrong?"

"This *café* tastes odd. You have not poisoned me, have you?" She was only half-joking.

The Empress Mother laughed. "No, you are pregnant again."

Idis stared at the Empress Mother with an open mouth. "How did you—?" She had only realised this was a possibility two days earlier, and told Thor.

The Empress Mother laughed even harder. "I became very, very good at working out who among the harem might be pregnant. The way you sat down with your hand over your belly protectively, your full bosom—"

"But even I am not sure," said Idis.

"I think you are," said the Empress Mother.

Idis was not sure what to say. She stared at the *café* cup, and at the ground *café* on the edge where she had sipped from it. "I do not want to hope too much."

"I think you will fine this time, if you are already finding that *café* tastes odd," said the Empress Mother. "You did not have that trouble last time, did you? I do not recall you rejecting *café* before."

"No, I did not," said Idis.

"Well, you must write to me when the baby is born," said the Empress Mother. "I think it will be more than six months before you can return, in light of what we have just discussed, which is good for you but sad for me."

"I will write if I do not return earlier," said Idis.

"I have been thinking about what your *damat* said," said the Empress Mother. "I have never been able to understand why your father did not seize the throne?"

Idis laughed. "He did not even want the Stewardship, Empress Mother, from what my mother has said; it was only that he was the last of his line left after the War of the Ring."

The Empress Mother narrowed her mouth. "I still do not understand."

"He is not motivated by power," said Idis.

"Only the powerful may have that luxury," said the Empress Mother.

"True," said Idis. She bid farewell to the Empress Mother and to Ferzil.

The next two days were spent packing, and then they walked through Beyazim.

"Farewell, Beyazim," said Idis. "We will be back."