

# Octopus balls

It was not supposed to happen like this. Once, Ferdil had dreamed of making a grand discovery that would change the world or inventing some ingenious device, or even a commission in the Corps of Engineers, or working with Lord Amrothos of Dol Amroth. Somehow, none of those things had happened, and he had ended up in a school, teaching boys whose brains ranged from barely sentient to one notable case where a boy possessed not only a keen natural intelligence, but had clearly been taught the physical sciences by Lord Amrothos and possibly Dwarves.

It was just about midnight, and, having finished his cup of tea, he was just about ready for bed, when there was a sound of running feet in the corridor. The pounding on his door was frantic, as was the shouting, “Magister Ferdil, Magister Ferdil, I think he’s been poisoned!”

Ferdil opened his door and almost got an armful of a panicking Mistor.

“What is it, Mistor, who’s been poisoned?” He was a good enough lad, but rather prone to flights of fancy.

“It’s Elboron!” Mistor was almost sobbing. “He’s been throwing up and he looks like he’s going to collapse and he’s been with us all day, and someone’s poisoned him and we’re all going to die!”

Quite ignoring the last statement, Ferdil left his room, and, herding the distressed Mistor in front of him, at last came to the privy, where, Elboron was lying half on the floor, groaning.

There was a small crowd around him like a flock of disorganised lanky adolescent crows, all limbs and panic, generally getting in the way.

Noting at the back of his mind that at least some of the boys showed a degree of common sense, Matron Nellor was already there, the back of her hand on Elboron’s brow, frowning.

She stood and went up to Ferdil, and quietly said, “I think we should call for a Healer—he’s certainly running a fever and none of the other boys say that they are feeling unwell.”

Ferdil nodded and looked at the ill boy—Osgaron, one of the bigger and stronger ones, was attempting to help Elboron up—while Adrahil had appeared with a cup of water.

“Right, everyone—back to bed—you’ll do no good crowding around.” Then, remembering that several of the boys—including Elboron—had been given permission to go into the City in the afternoon, Ferdil asked “Who was in the city with Elboron today?”

As he had expected, Mistor, Adrahil and Osgaron raised their hands almost reflexively. “You three, stay—the rest of you—back to the dormitory.”

Just as predictably, Trastion sneered, but said nothing.

Ferdil sighed. “If you will stay here for a moment, Matron Nellor, I shall let the Headmaster know.”

As expected, the Headmaster received the news of their star pupil’s illness with a grim set to his mouth, but sent runners to the Houses of Healing and to the Citadel. Ferdil was not sure whether he

was glad or not that the white flag of the Steward flew beside that of the King, evidence that Elboron's father was in residence.

By the time he returned to the privy, Headmaster in tow, Elboron had apparently drunk the water and thrown it all back up, if his wet shirt (and Osgaron's) was any indication. Someone had brought Matron Nellor a stack of towels.

"Do you think you're done for now, Master Elboron?" Matron was asking gently.

Elboron groaned again and muttered something.

"I think we'd better get you to the infirmary: better than this cold and smelly privy." She nodded firmly, "Master Osgaron, can you help him up?"

In a short time, Elboron had been settled into the narrow room next to Matron's apartments that they kept boys who were ill or injured while deciding whether to transport them to the Houses of Healing. Osgaron was dispatched to fetch a change of clothes for both Elboron and himself, and the Headmaster, Ferdil, Adrahil and the still-panicking Mistor—Ferdil idly found himself reminded of the nervous, big-eyed little ratting terriers—sat in Matron's sitting room while she sat next to Elboron.

"Adrahil," Ferdil addressed himself to the calmer of the two boys, "can you tell us what happened this afternoon in the city, where you went, and if you ate anything? Take your time, and don't strain yourself if you can't remember."

Adrahil, blinked, and took a deep breath, and then visibly retraced the afternoon in his head. "Well, after we left the gate, we went to the main market. Osgaron hasn't been to the City on a market day, you see. So we walked around a bit, but didn't stop or buy anything. Nobody said anything to us. Then we stopped and we bought some chips—" he stopped and looked alarmed, blinking.

"Go on," the Headmaster urged.

"We bought some chips—Elboron paid," he added, "but I don't think the lady took a good look at him, and then we ate the chips."

"All four of you?"

Adrahil nodded.

"Did you see her cook them in front of you?"

"Yes!" Mistor interrupted, "it was Mistress Tiriell's cart!" He began to sound even more distressed. "And she filters her oil every day, changes it every three days, she cooks all her chips right in front of you to order, and she runs a clean cart, sir! She gets new paper to wrap it in, and she only has one salt cellar on the go at a time, and she fills them up again only when they're all empty, and she makes her sauces fresh, sir—" He sounded so miserable that Ferdil knew then that the chips and the vendor had been Mistor's idea.

There was a commotion outside the door, as none other than the Deputy Warden of the Houses of Healing arrived: a calm, clear eyed woman with a no-nonsense air. "We thought," Deputy Warden Halvien said drily, "that given the circumstances, discretion was warranted and I am seen making

calls in the City more often than the Warden. Now, let us have a look at you, Lord Elboron," she sat down at his bedside and took his wrist, as Ferdil retreated back into the sitting room.

"And after the chips?" Ferdil pressed.

Adrahil shrugged "We walked around for a bit more, and then the afternoon bell rang, so we started to come back here."

"Did you stop anywhere or eat anything else?" the Headmaster pressed.

Adrahil paused, and his eyebrows drew in, as they often did when he was thinking hard. "No, I don't think we did, because we thought about stopping for a drink but then the afternoon bell rang and it was just as easy to come back."

"Do you remember if you had anything on the chips?" the Headmaster continued.

Adrahil nodded, "Salt, and then, well—she called it aioli—but it wasn't."

Mistor made a sound very like a protest.

"But it was nice!" he said hastily. "And we all had it, so if it was in that, wouldn't we be sick now too?" Adrahil's eyes went wide. "Oh no—what if it was in that?"

"Don't be silly, Adrahil," Mistor's breath was starting to come in short. "Mistress Tirië's cart is one of the busiest in the market, if there was anything in there, half the people in the market would be sick by now and there was no way that she could have known we were coming, too." He sounded quite determined.

"The boy is quite right, Headmaster Gaurdir, Magister Ferdil. I do not think there is much more he can tell of the matter."

A man stood at the door; he had appeared so quietly that none of them had seen or heard him.

Ferdil scrambled up at the quiet, commanding voice, and his jaw dropped.

The Lord Steward of Gondor was every bit as intimidating in person as he was by repute, a tall man dressed all in black, with penetrating pale grey eyes like his son's.

"My lord," the Headmaster came to the door, "Lord Elboron is in the infirmary with the Deputy Warden—"

Elboron's father stepped aside to let the Headmaster out, then followed him the few paces with silent steps, and then, when they reached the room, sitting down on the stool that someone fetched for him with an absent nod.

It appeared Osgaron had been undergoing a similar interrogation with the Deputy Warden: "... no, we all had the chips, and ... O no, excuse me ..."

He stood up and barely made it to the bucket in the corner of the room before he too was violently ill into it, and falling to his knees.

If the situation were not so dire, Ferdil would have laughed, as Steward, Deputy Warden and Headmaster all looked at Adrahil and Mistor. Adrahil drew his shoulders up as though he was trying not to cringe. Mistor started breathing even faster, and quivering.

"Are you well, Master Mistor?" the Lord Steward asked, his voice concerned.

"He's just nervous, don't mind him," Adrahil interjected.

"I see, Master Adrahil." The Lord Steward's eyes narrowed. "Your father currently works with my uncle, does he not?"

"Yes, sir," he squeaked.

"Hmmm." The Deputy Warden looked from Osgaron to the prone Elboron, and then speculatively at Adrahil and Mistor. "Did you two leave them at any time in the afternoon?"

Adrahil thought hard. "I ... don't ..."

"You had to go pee, remember?" Mistor, with typically terrible timing, perked up. "Master Dawon said we weren't to leave each other alone, so we left Osgaron with Elboron and went." He frowned. "But we can't have been more than five minutes, and they were right where we left them."

"... Those ... octopus things ..." Osgargon groaned into the bucket.

"Octopus?" Adrahil said incredulously. "Where would you get *octopus* in Minas Tirith?"

"No, those fried ball things," Osgargon rolled over and sat up as Matron came to him with a wet towel. "When you went, Elboron saw them, and said he'd had them in Dol Amroth and got some. They were really weird and rubbery and they had that white sauce on them that we had with the chips. I had one and he had the rest."

Adrahil stared at him. "You had *octopus balls* in Minas Tirith?"

"That's what he called them, but there wasn't any octopus in them, just these weird rubbery things."

"It's octopus, cut up! And then cooked in batter," Adrahil said impatiently, interrupting him. "We have them in Dol Amroth but the octopus is straight out of the sea. Do you know how long it would take for it to get here? *Days*! And it's nearly summer!"

Ferdil dared a look at the Lord Steward and the Deputy Warden, who both wore expressions of hope and relief.

"I like them myself," the Lord Steward said cautiously, "but only in Dol Amroth." He paused and looked at his son. "I take it Alphros took you down to the docks for them two years ago?"

Elboron moaned in response.

"I can see no obvious signs of anything other than a rather serious case of gastroenteritis," the Deputy Warden noted, "and for you, Master Osgaron, a milder case. However, as it can spread by touch, I would strongly recommend that both of you stay in the infirmary. I shall send to the Houses

for the medications but the best treatment is rest and lots of fluids for the next three days. I shall stay and observe until the morning to be sure.”

“Thank you, Deputy Warden Halvien, I am much obliged to you.” The Lord Steward nodded. “I shall be back in the morning, and I thank you all again: Headmaster Gaurdir, Matron Nellor, Magister Ferdil, Master Osgaron, Master Mistor, Master Adrahil.” He patted Elboron’s hand.

Though he was already standing straight, he seemed to draw himself up even taller, as he started to move out of the room, so quietly. Ferdil barely remembered to bow.

“O,” Elboron’s father said, pausing and turning back, “during your leave, Master Osgaron, Master Mistor, Master Adrahil, would you like to come and stay with Elboron this summer in Emyrn Arnen? I will write to your parents for their leave, of course.”

Ferdil turned back to see all three boys gaping at the older man in disbelief, and, of them all, Adrahil seemed to nod in response for the three of them, as the Lord Steward inclined his head slightly and left the room.