

Idis's bad date

Idis wished her parents hadn't sent Captain Beregond to pick her up. Captain Beregond had seen her at her worst point, a year ago—the time she preferred not to think about—her mind shied away from it.

Beregond looked very serious. "Is everything well, Lady Idis? Your mother was concerned by the tenor of your letter."

Idis wrinkled her nose. "I am well. It's just ... it's the flamingoes."

Beregond stared at her. "What? What are flam...ming...ohs?"

Idis sighed. "They are Cousin Amrothos and Aunt Nilofar's latest obsession. Follow me." She drew Beregond to the mullioned window and waved a hand. "Those birds. There, in the moat."

Beregond squinted out the window. "The large white ones, standing on one leg? My! I've never seen birds such as those before."

Idis hissed at Beregond, "Shh! Don't call them white! Please! Tell Aunt Nilofar that they're yellow."

Beregond glanced at Idis. "They might have a slightly creamy tinge?"

"Thank you," said Idis. "Aunt Nilofar has been feeding them turmeric, you see, in an effort to turn them yellow."

Beregond blinked. "I don't think it works like that?"

"Ah, but it does!" Idis waved her hands. "Ordinarily, flamingoes are *pink*."

"Those are not pink," Beregond observed.

"Apparently, they eat a form of pink sea creature in Harad," Idis noted. "And when they eat that, they turn pink. Aunt Nilofar and Cousin Amrothos want to see if it works with other colours. Unfortunately, flamingoes don't eat woad."

Beregond blinked again. "Woad? The material with which the warriors of Rhûn paint their faces?"

Idis nodded. "They wanted to make *bluish grey flamingoes*."

"Ah." Beregond nodded. "Your parents have said we are to escort you home."

"I do love Aunt Nilofar and Cousin Amrothos, but they are going through a particularly insane stage at the moment," agreed Idis.

At that point Amrothos came out. "NILOOOOFAR! MUREX SNAILS! SNAILS! MUREX SNAILS!"

From the other end of the corridor, Nilofar emerged, a smudge of bluish grey on her face. "The small prawns just will not eat woad either," she complained. "It is most vexing of them. What did you say, Amrothos?"

"MUREX SNAILS!" bellowed Amrothos. "Shall we see if flamingoes eat murex snails?"

Nilofar's face brightened. "Yes! Imagine! Imagine if we could have royal purple flamingoes!"

"Why would want want royal purple flamingoes?" Beregond inquired politely.

Amrothos swivelled to look at Beregond. "*Why wouldn't one want royal purple flamingoes?* That is the true question." Then he turned and disappeared back into his room.

Nilofar focused her eyes, as if from a great distance. "Idis! Is it time for me to ask you about the death wish again?"

Idis grit her teeth and looked sidelong at Beregond. "Please. Please don't. I am not currently feeling any kind of death wish, but if you continue asking me about it, I may begin to."

Beregond winced. "Yes. Probably a topic best left alone."

Nilofar took a book out of her apron, and muttered to herself in Haradric as she wrote. "*Is not presently feeling death wish. Does say that if I keep asking her, she may feel one. Must investigate why this is.*"

"It's sheer irritation, Aunt Nilofar," said Idis.

"Ah, thank you Idis," said Nilofar. She switched back into Haradric. "*She thinks sheer irritation at my questions may be the answer. This is a breakthrough.*"

"What is in the book?" said Beregond.

Nilofar smiled beatifically at Beregond. "So, you know that wrinkled peas tend to produce wrinkled peas?"

"I haven't really thought about it," confessed Beregond.

Nilofar shook her head. "Well, there's no accounting for the way other people think. But! If it follows that wrinkled peas produce wrinkled peas, does it follow that two people with death wishes produce offspring with death wishes? I am taking notations as to Idis's feelings after Éowyn wrote to warn me of her situation."

"She wakes me in the middle of the night, and takes notes about me in that book," confirmed Idis.

"It is necessary to check you are not feeling a death wish in the night. I don't see why logically, one couldn't, although you mostly just groan at me and say you are fine," said Nilofar. "We did take the precaution of installing Vashir the Fat Eunuch Walrus in your room however."

"*What*, by the Valar?" said Beregond.

"Vashir the Fat Eunuch Walrus is a very large neutered tom cat," Idis explained.

"But that name?" said Beregond.

Nilofar gazed at him. "It's very logical. He is named Vashir after my brother in law because he has long whiskers and fangs, and also he looks very like a walrus when he rests, just like Vashir. He is a eunuch because he is neutered. Hence, his name is Vashir the Fat Eunuch Walrus. We have been doing experiments with neutered males, and they do run to fat, just as I deem human eunuchs run to fat. I wonder why this is?" Nilofar gazed at the ceiling, which was marked with soot from past explosions and fires.

"I'm here to take Lady Idis back to Emyr Arnen," said Beregon.

"Have a lovely journey," said Nilofar, not looking down from the ceiling. "I'll send a pigeon if we get the blue-gray flamingoes, Idis." She turned and went back into her room.

"Was that it?" said Beregon. "That's all she's saying?"

"Yes, rather," said Idis. "Also they have turned the dining room into a hamster maze."

"We shall leave first thing tomorrow," said Beregon, decidedly.

"Thank you very much for your understanding," said Idis.

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Idis sat in her father's study and stared at the *lebethron* desk.

"I can understand," said Faramir, steepling his fingers, "that the flamingo experiments must have been irritating. Beregon told me somewhat of them."

"The flamingoes are becoming quite fat," Idis observed.

Her father's cat Beru came in, and gave Idis a narrow-eyed look, then nudged Idis's hand with her nose. "I am fine, Beru," Idis told the cat.

"She worries," said Faramir. Beru leapt up onto his lap, and watched Idis with unblinking green eyes.

"So what happened while I was in Dol Amroth?" said Idis.

"Nothing much," said her father. "I did get some proposals for your hand. Shall we go through them? I have the fire stoked up—"

Idis laughed. "Very well." She bent her head as her father put a stack of letters on the table.

"Hah! Duinion, son of Belegorn," said Faramir. "Written by his father. I'm not convinced Lord Duinion knows he's being offered up thus?"

"Don't know him," said Idis. "Never met him in my life."

Her father crumpled up the letter, and Idis took it and tossed it into the fire, where it went up in a blossom of orange.

They continued through the letters.

“Beren, son of Orodreth,” said Faramir. “*Not* to be confused with Beren of Anorien, Lord Halmir’s nephew. I’d not recommend *that* Beren, although he is a nice person—it is just that he is obsessed by maps to the exclusion of all else in life.”

“No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o,” said Idis.

Faramir crumpled the letter.

Idis picked it up and flattened it out.

“Daughter?” said Faramir.

“I met him once.” Idis shrugged. “He wasn’t horrible.”

Her father grimaced. “‘Not horrible’ is hardly high praise.”

“Maybe that’s all I can expect,” said Idis.

Faramir took the letter off her. “I think you are entitled to expect more.”

Idis stood up. “But—should I not at least give this man a chance?” She remembered what her friend Laston had said, in the time she didn’t allow herself to think about—that some men, including himself, might like a woman who bore swords and knives. One part of Idis now wished she’d told Laston earlier that she was a woman, and they’d had a chance to explore that idea at least a little bit. Another part of her felt guilty for even thinking of such a thing.

Her father regarded her for a long while. “Hmmm.”

“What happened to my friends from the Army?” said Idis.

Her father narrowed his eyes. “No more running away.” Beru mewed agreement.

“I did say I was sorry,” Idis said, looking at the table.

Faramir frowned. “Beregond told me about Nilofar’s questions.” He shook his head.

“There was no malice in them!” protested Idis.

“Of course there was not. Nilofar is, however, filled with curiosity, and she has no tact whatsoever. I wish your mother hadn’t told Nilofar what happened, but she was very, very worried about you.”

Idis’s heart stung. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

Her father sighed. “I deem this Beren is not right for you, Little Cat.” He paused. “Nor was Laston, for what it is worth.”

A prickle ran down Idis’s spine. “I told you, nothing happened there.”

“I know nothing happened. It would have been very unfair to him if you had let it happen,” said Faramir. “He did not comprehend the extent to which you outranked him.”

"That is what I told him," Idis said. "I said he had only ever seen the smallest sliver of who I really was, and that he wouldn't like me if he knew what I truly was."

Faramir looked sad. "He would have liked you still, I deem. It is just that he would also have resented you. Even your mother found it hard; she had not been educated to the same extent as I had, and when we first wed, she worried that she was not good enough for me."

"But you *adore* Mummy!" said Idis.

Faramir's face lit up. "I do." Then his face shadowed. "The question I have is this: am I good enough for her?"

"You two are *hopeless*," Idis informed her father.

Her father smiled again. "We are."

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Idis, Beregond and Faramir were trying to explain how and why Éowyn was required to chaperone Idis.

"So, Mummy, you have to come to the meeting with this man and his mother," said Idis.

"But why?" said Éowyn. "You are an independent grown woman of age? Finduilas did not need me to come to meetings with Aldarion."

"The idea is that you have to ensure nothing improper happens," said Faramir. "Also—you did not chaperone Finduilas because she courted Aldarion without telling us—although I was of course aware of what was going on."

"But if this man does anything improper, Idis will be able to handle him," said Éowyn, with immense pride. "I know my girl. She will geld him if necessary. It is why I did not worry about Finn with Aldarion."

Beregond crossed his legs with a wince.

Faramir sighed. "Recall the time when Éomer made Elfhelm accompany you? It's more for *those* kinds of reasons. Be like Elfhelm."

To Idis's interest, her mother suddenly blushed bright red, and looked at her father sidelong, through her eyelashes. "O. But—I do not think this will happen with Idis? She barely knows this man?"

Beregond burst out laughing. "Some people can develop a remarkable level of affection in a short time, my Lady—"

To Idis's astonishment, her father began to look a little pink as well. "Sometimes."

"What was Elfhelm doing?" said Idis.

Éowyn pointed at her. "Very well. I will not let you kiss or embrace this this man, Idis." She leaned forward, and smiled impishly. "Unless you really, *really* want to, in which case, I will pretend to look the other way."

Faramir shook his head. "No, no! Don't pretend to look the other way."

Éowyn looked at her husband in surprise. "But you said to be like Elfhelm? That's what Elfhelm did!"

Beregond was now laughing hysterically, while Faramir had closed his eyes and looked mortified.

"Anyway, I doubt I shall want to kiss or embrace this man," said Idis, wrinkling up her nose at further evidence of her parents' passionate courtship. It was very daunting having parents who were Heroes of the Realm and famous lovers. Idis did not feel she could even begin to hope for anything of the sort.

Éowyn gave her daughter a blue-eyed glare, sharp as a knife. "If you don't want to kiss or embrace this man, what are you doing meeting him?"

"I have to find some use," said Idis. "Mayhap 'tis as a wife?"

"I don't think this is a good idea," said Éowyn, firmly. "A thing I have learned is this: do not just throw yourself at the first available man just because he is there."

"Let her make her own judgement, dear," said Faramir. "Everyone has to make her own mistakes, as you know."

Éowyn looked sourly at her husband. Idis was confused. "What mistakes did you make, Mummy?"

"Must I bear a sword to chaperone?" said Éowyn. Idis was not oblivious to the fact that her mother had swiftly changed the topic, and wondered to what her father had been referring.

Beregond sighed. "No."

"But Elfhelm had a sword," said Éowyn.

"When I said 'Be like Elfhelm', I did not mean 'Be *exactly* like Elfhelm'," Faramir said.

"Then my role is to interrogate this man and make sure he is suitable for my beloved daughter, and stop them from kissing and embracing should they wish to—?" said Éowyn, beaming at Idis.

"Maybe not so much *interrogate*," said Beregond. "Just—observe."

Idis was starting to think that meeting Beren was a mistake, but she could not think of a way to get out of it.

"As I said, some of us have to learn through doing," said Faramir, glancing at her.

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The meeting was held in one of Eryn Arnen's parlours. "This is where we keep the banners of our defeated enemies," said her mother proudly, to Lady Maidhien, as they walked through the entrance hall.

Lady Maidhien looked vaguely shocked. "I thought the custom was to put up one's own banners?"

"We had so many defeated enemies that we thought we might as well put them up *somewhere*," said Éowyn. "We have our own banners outside, as you'd have seen."

Idis did not dare look directly at Beren. She glanced at him for a moment, and then looked back at her hands. Her stomach was churning with nerves.

The dogs came running into the entrance hall and threw themselves at Idis and Éowyn. One dog cornered Beren against the wall and, to Idis's utter humiliation, began to sniff his crotch with great enthusiasm.

"Naughty Helm!" said Éowyn, swatting at the dog. "Naughty! Leave Lord Beren alone."

"That is a very unusual dog," said Beren faintly. "Very *furry*?"

"Helm's a Eastfold Shepherd. They can be very protective, and they like to herd. We use them to protect flocks in Rohan." Éowyn glared at Helm. "*Out! Out now.*" Helm slunk out, giving Beren a baleful look.

"Do you like animals, Lady Idis?" said Maidhien.

"O yes," said Idis shyly, "but not quite as much as Cirion. I have not lately rescued any three legged donkeys."

Her mother burst out laughing, but Maidhien and Beren did not laugh.

Éowyn continued on blithely, "Cirion is always rescuing animals. One time he put snails in his bed at night because he did not want the gardener to kill them."

"O," said Maidhien. "That is the Captain General, no?"

"Yes," said Éowyn. "He and his wife live in the cottage just down the way. It's convenient because he's away so very often and therefore I can help Fíriel if she needs it."

"She was a *commoner* originally, was she not?" said Beren in tones of disapproval.

"We like her very much," said Idis sharply.

Éowyn looked at Beren with narrowed eyes. "So we do." She visibly rearranged her expression into a pleasant one and smoothed her white dress down. "Come into the first parlour! I have arranged for cinnamon pastries."

"I don't like cinnamon," said Beren.

Éowyn gave Idis a quick glance. "Then I shall also ensure we have apple danishes."

They sat in the parlour: it was not often used except for diplomatic occasions, and Idis found the chairs a little uncomfortable. Maids came out with cinnamon pastries, and, after a brief whispered command by Éowyn, apple danishes. Tea was brought out too—with a separate pot for Éowyn.

"I prefer my tea in the style of Rohan," said Éowyn. "Any of you are welcome to have it if you'd like?"

"No, thank you," said Maidhien.

There was a long awkward pause.

"So, Lady Idis, are some of these lovely embroideries on the wall yours?" said Maidhien, eventually.

Idis looked at the tapestries. "No." There was another long, even more awkward pause.

"She can sew but she doesn't really like it," said Éowyn. "This is unsurprising because I don't really like it either. I only sew for your father these days, don't I, Idis?"

"She sews designs of good omen on his battle shirts," said Idis.

"I am not letting him go out unblessed," said Éowyn, fiercely. "His shirts shall have embroidery and he must always drink from the leaving cup."

"Ah," said Beren.

"So do you play the harpsichord?" said Maidhien.

"The harpsichord?" said Idis.

"All young ladies of quality know how to play the harpsichord!" said Beren, with shock.

"I don't think that is the case, because none of *my* daughters have an interest in playing the harpsichord," said Éowyn. "They can sing a fine Rohirric thrednody, however?"

"I can sing the sad tale of King Helm's defeat at Deeping Coombe in the tongue of Rohan?" offered Idis, nervously.

"What happened to King Helm?" said Beren.

"He froze to death defending the realm of Rohan," said Éowyn. "We all cry whenever we hear the song."

"This is true. It's probably best I don't sing it then," Idis noted. "But that's why it's called Helm's Deep. That way ended the first line of barrows of Kings outside Edoras."

"You don't play the harpsichord and you don't embroider," said Maidhien, blankly. "What is it you *do*? Do you paint, Lady Idis?"

Idis exchanged glances with Éowyn. "Not really," she said. "I ride horses?"

Éowyn pulled herself up straight and beamed. "She rides horses *extremely well*."

"I still think Uncle Éomer should have let me join the Muster," said Idis, sulkily. "Shield-maidens are more acceptable in Rohan."

Éowyn turned to Idis and spoke in her mother tongue. "Nay, nay, nay, we have had this conversation. Absolutely not. I am not allowing you to get yourself killed, my love."

"Aye, Mummy," said Idis.

"What language was that?" said Beren, blankly.

Idis squinted at him. "The tongue of Rohan. You do not speak it?"

"No, he does not," said Maidhien defensively. "Of course, he knows Sindarin, as any gentleman ought."

Idis was flooded with relief: finally here was something she had in common with this man. She dared to smile at Beren. He did not smile back.

"Of course, Idis is *very* gifted with languages," said Éowyn, exceptionally proudly. "She speaks Sindarin, Quenya, Rohirric, Haradric and Westron. She did try to learn Dwarvish but Gimli would not teach it to her."

"*Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu!*" said Idis.

"Huh?" said Beren.

"It's the only phrase Gimli was prepared to teach me." Idis spread her hands. "It's the Dwarvish battle cry, and thus he regards it as in the public domain. 'Here come the Dwarves! The Dwarves are upon you!'"

"Battle cry—" Maidhien pursed her lips.

"Dwarves are very brave warriors. We have an excellent relationship with the Glittering Caves of Aglarond," said Éowyn.

"Gimli gave me an axe," Idis noted. "I was most touched. He was really happy that I wanted to study the Dwarves in that detail, but they are very interesting! Did you know that their women folk are indistinguishable from their men folk? I haven't actually met a female Dwarf yet, at least, to my knowledge—"

"What would you do with an axe, Lady Idis?" said Beren.

Idis blinked at him, and looked at him properly for the first time. His chin was rather weak. "I would fight with it, of course."

Éowyn beamed. "Idis is, of course, skilled with the sword, pole arms, axe and bow and arrow, but her particular skill is with throwing knives. She taught herself when she was eight, and is now extremely good with them."

"Throwing knives?" said Beren, blankly. "What are throwing knives?"

Idis flicked her wrist, and brought out one of her throwing knives. “*These.*”

Maidhien screamed, leaped up from her seat and knocked over a plate of cinnamon pastries and her cup of tea. Beren threw himself in front of her. “I will protect you, Mama!”

“There is nothing to protect her from,” said Idis, with confusion, folding the knife away. “I would never hurt your mother? She is a guest in our house. It is simply that you did not know what a throwing knife was, so I thought I might show you?”

“You have drunk our tea and broken bread with us,” said Éowyn, disapprovingly. “The Rohirrim ask guests to drink mead with them to signal that they are honoured guests. Faramir has persuaded me that tea is an adequate substitute.” She paused and looked at Idis, speaking in the tongue of Rohan. “They dishonour us much by presuming that we would attack them.”

“They do rather,” agreed Idis, in the same tongue.

Beru padded in and sniffed one of the fallen pastries with interest. “Argh, a lynx!” said Beren.

“No, that’s just Beru,” said Idis. “She has her winter coat in; that’s why she’s so fluffy at the moment.”

Beru turned to Beren and eyed him with suspicion. Then she hissed, puffed herself up and spat at him, making a swiping motion at his leg with her paw. Idis noted that Beru’s claws were unsheathed.

“Bad Beru, bad!” said Idis. “He’s a guest here. Don’t spit at him!”

Éowyn got up, picked up the spitting cat, put the cat out, and called in a maid to pick up the pastries, while Maidhien and Beren sat rather gingerly back on their seats.

“So, I am fluent in five languages, an excellent horse rider, and I am skilled in all manner of weapons,” said Idis, tentatively.

“She would be excellent at defending your homestead,” noted Éowyn. “Or, well, anything really. We would never allow her to *attack* people, in case you are still worried—Faramir has laid down a rule that she must only use weapons to defend herself or others.”

“I am also very interested in history?” said Idis, even more tentatively.

“I hate history,” said Beren. “It is very boring. I do not see what you would find of interest in it.”

“Ah!” said Idis. “But—perhaps you have not read the interesting histories! Just the other day, I was reading Lord Glorfindel’s account of King Eärnur’s attack on Minas Morgul—”

Éowyn mock-shuddered and laughed. “No. You remind me of the ELF DINNER!”

Idis laughed too, having heard the tale many times. “But I thought you were seated with Lady Galadriel and Aunt Arwen?”

“No, but Lady Galadriel *called Lord Glorfindel over* with her mind. I am sure of it,” said Éowyn. “It was all I could do not to hide under the table. Anyway, I was interested to hear your account of what Lord Glorfindel said about Eärnur, darling. He does seem to have been a very silly King. Do you think

he was the Mouth of Sauron? That's the theory some people have—that he was captured and turned into that horrible Messenger who was rude to Aragorn and Éomer outside the Black Gates—”

“Interesting theory, Mother!” Idis sat up. “Well—!”

“If you will excuse us, we must get back to Minas Tirith,” said Maidhien.

“O yes, of course,” said Éowyn, and rose in an elegant fashion. “Let us see you out to your coach?”

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Faramir looked at Éowyn and Idis, while smoothing down a letter. “So, it seems that Lord Beren does not wish to proceed with his courtship of Idis.”

“This is just as well,” said Éowyn, darkly. “They *dishonoured* us, Faramir. *Dishonoured*. It was all I could do not to send them fleeing on the spot.”

“I did tell you, Idie dear, not to bring out the knives in polite company,” said Faramir.

“I know, but he didn't know what Mummy meant by throwing knives and I thought I might show him,” said Idis wretchedly. “I am just no good.”

Éowyn drew herself up. “You, my daughter, are *perfection itself*. That man was no good. He did not like cinnamon pastries. He did not appreciate your riding or skill with language. Helm and Beru did not like him. He had no chin, and his eyes bulged. He reminded me rather of *Wormtongue*. I would have had no difficulty in restraining you from kissing him. He was in no way worthy of *my child*.”

“Beru did not like him?” said Faramir.

“No. Beru spat at him and tried to scratch him,” said Idis.

“I shall take that under advisement,” said her father, narrowing his eyes. “What did Helm do?”

“Helm backed him into a corner and tried to sniff his crotch,” said Idis, glumly.

Éowyn started to laugh. “Do you know how hard it was not to laugh? He was squeaking and the dog had backed him up against that horse tapestry—”

“Éowyn!” said Faramir.

“It was funny,” Éowyn insisted. “It was really funny.”

“It was really embarrassing,” said Idis.

“Still,” said Faramir. “I think I am glad that Lord Beren has withdrawn his expression of interest in you, Idis.”

“But this still doesn't answer the question!” said Idis.

“What question?” said Éowyn.

"What am I to do with myself?"

Faramir leaned back in his chair. "Well. You are studious and very clever. Mayhap we could make inquiries at the University of Dol Amroth about whether you might take a course there?"

"Aunt Nilofar suggested that I take a course by correspondence at the University of Umbar," Idis noted. "That's how she did her doctorate. Apparently they are less prejudiced about female students, and will allow them to take doctorates if they demonstrate aptitude."

"But the point of this, Idie dear, is that you should meet people other than us," said Faramir. "That will not work if you are still here doing a degree by correspondence."

"I don't want her to go away," Éowyn sniffed.

"I'll get the boys and Amrothos and Nilofar to keep an eye on her, if my inquiries are successful," said Faramir. "Anyway. 'Tis just an idea at this stage. Shall I make inquiries, Idis?"

Idis shrugged. "I suppose so. It must be better than being married off to the chinless wonder or being stuck with colourful flamingoes."

Éowyn started to laugh again. "'Chinless wonder'—!"

"Very well," said Faramir. "I shall proceed. And don't get too disheartened, darling. We did tell you that this man was not right for you, but you had to know it for yourself."

"Yes Daddy," said Idis.

"If you ever find a man who *doesn't* jump when you take out your daggers, keep him," advised Éowyn.

"A good test," said Idis.