

Barthon and Idis

Barthon could identify when it all started.

He had been with his colleague Idis, at a public house frequented by her younger brother. She had been dressed as a man, pretending to be her somewhat notorious brother Ecthelion, and consequently, she had to fend off approaches from several interested men. Their intention had been to sting a certain illegal gambling operator, but he had not turned up for the meeting. Both Idis and Barthon had had to drink several pints of beer to keep up the pretence that they were there for other reasons.

Barthon had risen and sat by Idis. "Hullo."

Idis had ignored him.

"I do not think your friend is coming, in case you are wondering," Barthon had said.

Idis had looked down her nose at him. "Do I know you?" she had said gruffly. Then she had sighed. "You may be right. And I have drunk too much."

Barthon had looked at her with concern. "I shall get you home, then."

Idis had waved her hand in a way her brother often did, still keeping in character. "No need." She stood up and strode across the public house. She had been noticeably unsteady. Barthon had dithered, and then followed her.

"Good luck with him, he's not himself tonight," one of the other men standing at the bar had said. "Usually he's up for anything, but he's out of sorts tonight."

"I'm more worried he'll break his neck," Barthon had said, blushing at the thought that he looked like someone who was interested in men.

The man at the bar had laughed. "Sure, sure."

Barthon had shaken his head, and followed Idis out. She had been weaving unsteadily down the street and he had run up behind her, and unwisely grabbed her arm. She had twisted, and flicked out her daggers.

"It's me!" he had hissed at her, and fortunately, she had hesitated, her daggers an inch from his gut.

"Barthon, you fool," she had said in her normal voice, a little slurred. "I could have stabbed you, and then I would have been very sad." Then she had folded her daggers away, much more slowly than usual.

"You are drunk, and I am getting you home."

She had leaned up against him, still facing him. "You do not need to worry about me."

"Bad luck," Barthon had said, and pushed her off him. He had learned (to his intense discomfort) that if any man got too close to her, and that man touched her chest in an effort to push her away, he would be in no doubt that she was a woman. "Wait, where do you live anyway?"

"I live in the Steward's House along with various other family members," Idis had explained, waving her hand, as Barthon put his arm around her waist and attempted to guide her. "At the moment, there is Bron and Gala and their children and Daddy. It changes at different times."

"I shall take you there." Barthon had not been entirely steady either.

"I don't understand why," Idis had replied, looking at him owlshly, her face level with his.

"What don't you understand?"

"You do not even like me, Barthon. You have never liked me."

Barthon recalled that he had blushed. "I feel inadequate next to you, that is all."

After a long silence, Idis had said, "I am sorry, Barthon. I do not mean to be like that."

He had realised to his horror that she was drunkenly crying. "No! No, please do not cry. By the Valar I wish I had not said that." He had stopped and put his arms around her and she had cried into his shoulder.

"I do not hate you, Idis," he had said into her ear. "You are a little strange, but beautiful and amazing."

Idis had put her head up so her face was only an inch from his: they were the same height. She had laughed, and he had been able to smell the alcohol on her breath. "Beautiful? I do not think so. Finduilas is beautiful. No one would believe that *she* was a man if she dressed up in Ecthelion's suit."

He had kissed her on the lips. "I thought you were stunning from the moment I met you, Idis—" This was, in fact, one of the many things which had made him uncomfortable about working with her.

Her eyes had gone wide. "O!"

She had put her arms around him too, and they had kissed up against the wall. He was startled that she seemed to know exactly what she was doing: there was no shyness or hesitation.

Then he had let go of her with horror, as sense and sobriety returned. "Sorry! Sorry! I should not have done that."

"Well, I did not have to kiss you back," Idis had said. "I do not think either of us would have done it if we had not had so much to drink. You taste like beer. But I do not regret it; it was nice."

"I am glad it was nice," Barthon had said. "And now I should get you home."

"Might we do that again occasionally?" Idis had asked.

Barthon had been surprised. "If you want?" Then he had guided her back up to the Steward's House, his arm around her waist, and her arm over his shoulder.

To Barthon's shock, a man coming the other way had spat at them and said, "Stinking perverts!"

Idis had pulled out one of her daggers, and said in her normal voice, "I will cut off your vital parts if you spit at us again."

Barthon had laughed and laughed as the man ran away. Finally when they got to the Steward's House, Idis had said, "Thank you for walking me home."

Barthon had said, "It is no trouble." Then he kissed her on the cheek and walked off.

For several weeks after this, they met up after work, in a clandestine fashion. Often Idis dressed as her brother Ecthelion, or another of her assumed identities. They then went to Ecthelion's flat: he and his flat mate were on campaign with the Army in Harad, and Idis had the key to the flat.

The first time they had gone there, Barthon had said, "By the Valar, what are all these little toys?"

"Ecthelion's friend Beren makes little models of battles."

Barthon had stared at them. "That takes a lot of work."

"He is extremely obsessive about it. He will destroy a model and remake it if he discovers a detail is wrong."

They had carefully moved the models to another room so that they did not feel like the little model people were watching them—"Beren gets the eyes right, unfortunately," Idis had noted—then they had sat on the couch, drank wine and kissed.

"It feels fun and naughty doing this," Idis had said. "I feel like I am Ecthelion."

"If you were really Ecthelion you would be hitting me with a silk rope," Barthon had said.

Idis had looked at him with surprise, and he had said, "No, no! I do not want that!"

"Good," Idis had said. "I do not want to do that either! Why *anyone* would want to do that?"

They had never said anything about what their expectations were. Barthon certainly had not told anyone else, and he was presuming from Idis's clandestine behaviour that she had not told anyone else either. Most particularly they had not told their mutual master, Captain Rador of the Minas Tirith City Guard.

Now they were on Ecthelion's couch, and as always, they drank several glasses of wine, and then lay on the couch and kissed. Each visit, they had gone progressively further, taking off more and more clothing. On this occasion, Idis had taken off her trousers, and her shirt. She still wore the chest binding she wore to ensure she passed as a man, and Barthon slowly wound it off.

They caressed each other and kissed for while, and then Barthon slowly put his hands lower. She was so beautiful and he wanted to possess her, just for a short time.

“Ah,” said Idis, as he put his hands down her small clothes and began to explore there, a little more thoroughly than last time. She shivered and sat up. “I think I know where this is going, and it may interest you to know that I am sorely tempted.”

Barthon pulled his hands away. “But—?”

“But—I do not think you want to marry a woman like me,” said Idis. “You think I am interesting and dangerous, and I suspect you would probably like to sleep with me a few times, but I am not really made for that kind of interaction.”

Barthon sat back. “What do you mean?”

“I mean: if I ever do sleep with someone, I will give myself to him entirely. And I would be heartbroken if that person then went and married someone else. I have been alone too often.”

Barthon slumped. “I do like you, Idis.”

Idis kissed the top of his head as she stood and began to put her trousers back on too. “I know. And I like you too. This has been nice. I do not regret it, I say again.”

“But you are right—we would probably not suit each other as husband and wife,” said Barthon.

“No,” agreed Idis, buttoning up her shirt. “So—thank you, and I will see you tomorrow at the office. We shall continue as if nothing ever happened?”

“Yes, we shall,” said Barthon. He stood too and kissed her cheek. “It has been fun. Thank you too”

Once she was dressed, she handed him a key and said, “Lock Ecthelion’s door with this key and put it into the letter box—I will collect it tomorrow. Make sure you put the models back where they should be before you go.”

Then she walked out. Barthon sat silently on the couch for a time, washed his hands in the bathroom, and then he put the models back, locked the flat, and went to his own home.

That was how it ended. They never spoke of it again.