

Ecthelion gets a shock

Ecthelion was glad that he was not the current centre of controversy in his family. Of course they had all had turns at it, although Húrin's outrageous behaviour had simply consisted of getting drunk with Ecthelion when they were sixteen and eighteen respectively, on some of his late grandfather's fine wine.

However, the latest act of family controversy was distinctly different, in part because it involved his mother. She had outraged almost *everyone* by riding off to Harad with a retinue of retired Ithilien guardsmen and leaving a note for his father. Ecthelion's father very rarely got angry, but when he did, everyone hid. Ecthelion presumed that this was where his father's resemblance to his father Denethor was evident. In any case, *all* the children left in Minas Tirith or Ithilien been made aware of just how unhappy their father was with their mother. The twins had borne the brunt of it, particularly as it transpired that Dior and Daerien had been aware of their mother's plans.

"But Mother said she *had* to go, to save Idie's life!" Daerien had explained tearfully to Ecthelion.

"Humph," Ecthelion had said. "Mother is melodramatic. *Surely* you are aware of this, from the fact that she attempted to kill herself by riding into battle disguised as a man?"

Daerien had tossed her long brown hair. "There *are* risks to Idie, both in bearing and birthing twins. You know that she has been bleeding? I have started my medical training, as you know. Mother is right. And you are hardly someone to talk of melodrama, Ecthelion son of Faramir?"

Ecthelion had raised an eyebrow. "That is why I recognise it when I see it, dearest youngest sister."

In any case, his father's mood had eased somewhat when he had heard that his wife had safely made it to the Embassy of Gondor in Beyazim in Harad, before Idis's twins emerged. A flurry of pigeons had passed back and forth. Ambassador Arahaelon was apparently seriously unhappy about the unexpected arrival of Lady Éowyn. Ecthelion reflected that he could not really imagine his mother getting along very well with the Ambassador (who was also Ecthelion's some-time lover) and then resolved not to think of the two of them interacting again: it was just too disturbing.

Ecthelion decided to drop by his father's office to receive the latest update on this drama. He was enjoying the unwonted sense of watching this from afar, he reflected, rather than being in the centre of it. And then he wondered what Idis's husband Thor thought of it, but Thor was a very even-tempered and pleasant man who seemed to be able to deal with all the insane things Ecthelion's sister Idis did, so Ecthelion suspected Thor was taking it in his stride.

When Ecthelion got to his father's office, the clerk stared at him, solemn-faced. "O! You have heard, Lord Ecthelion?"

Ecthelion stared back at the clerk. "Heard what?"

The clerk looked down, an expression of chagrin on his face. "I'll just tell your father you're here."

Shortly afterwards, the clerk led a curious Ecthelion into his father's office. His father had his head in his hands, his dark hair streaked with grey at the temples.

Sudden fear hit Ecthelion. "Daddy?"

The clerk melted out of the room, and Faramir put up his head. His eyes were red as if he had been crying. "Sit down, Ecthelion," he said, in his usual calm tones.

"Very well," said Ecthelion, and sat on one of the green velvet chairs in front of his father's desk.

"Idis is—is—" His father began to cry "—not very well."

"What do you mean, 'not very well'?" said Ecthelion, with shock.

Faramir passed him a note, written in his mother's hand, curled up from being in the container on a pigeon's leg. Ecthelion smoothed it out and read:

Idis had a girl and a boy. The babies are well but she bled badly. My darling, prepare yourself: she may not survive. I will do my best to save our girl. E

Ecthelion stared at the note. There were letters on it, but somehow he was having difficulty making them go into his head. He read the note again.

"This doesn't make sense, Father."

His father blinked. "Why not?"

"Idis *can't* be dying."

Faramir sighed. "Everyone dies, unless they are of the Elder Race, Ecthelion."

Ecthelion stood up and shook his fist at his father. "Idis can't die! She *can't*! She's far too annoying to die!"

His father shrugged. "My older brother Boromir was annoying, for all that I loved him very much. That did not stop him from dying." Then he stood and embraced Ecthelion. "You will survive, son, if Idis dies, just as I survived when Boromir died."

Ecthelion suddenly found that he was bawling into his father's shoulder. "When she left this time, I had a fight with her, Daddy!"

"You *always* fight with Idis," said Faramir. "I wouldn't blame yourself for that."

"But with whom will I fight now?" Ecthelion sobbed, while his father patted his back. "There's no one else with whom I like to fight as much as I like to fight with Idie."

"Maybe you should write to her and tell her that," said his father, then kissed him on the forehead and both cheeks. "Be strong, son. I'm now glad that your mother went to Harad. She will look after Idis to the best of her ability."

"Maybe Idie's dead already," said Ecthelion hysterically. "Maybe there's no point writing to her!"

"She's not." His father looked awkward. "You know that I *knew*, when Boromir died? I saw his body float past me on the Anduin. I would know if my child died."

“What?” Ecthelion stopped crying. “You saw your brother’s body float past? *What?* How?”

His father looked distant. “I could not sleep one evening, and I felt compelled to stand by the river. And then—a grey boat came past—filled with water. There was a strange light about it. The boat was of Elven make. My brother lay in it, garbed just as he had been when I last saw him, apart from a gold belt, with links like leaves. He looked—*beautiful*. I found later that he died saving Meriadoc and Peregrin: he died doing good. I could see it in his face.”

“Was it a vision, or was it real?” said Ecthelion, with awe.

His father’s gaze sharpened. “Real, I think. Frodo and Samwise told me that the gold belt was a gift from Lady Galadriel, as was the boat. And Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli have told me that they arrayed Boromir in the boat in the way that I saw and sang him away.”

“Warn me if you have any strange compulsions about Idie,” said Ecthelion.

“Not yet,” said his father sadly. “I will tell you if I do.” Then he kissed Ecthelion on the forehead and cheeks again. “Go back to work. That’s how I’m distracting myself.”

The clerk gave Ecthelion a sympathetic look as he stumbled out of his father’s office.

Rather than taking his father’s advice, Ecthelion wandered around the corridors of the Citadel aimlessly. Some part of him could not believe it. His most annoying sister, bugbear of his life, was dying? Their long rivalry could not end like this, without him having a chance to argue with her one more time.

“Are you well, my Lord?” said a Citadel Guard, and Ecthelion realised he was crying again.

“Not really,” he said, conversationally. “I don’t want my sister to die.”

Then he kept wandering again, until he found himself outside the cartography offices, where his housemate and best friend Beren worked.

He pushed open the door, and the four cartographers looked up, all slightly irritated by the interruption. They were very focused and obsessive men.

“Ecthelion!” said Beren, smiling when he saw who it was. Then the smile fell off his face. “Ecthelion? What is the problem?”

Ecthelion burst into tears. “My sister Idis is dying! And she’s not allowed to die! I have to have one last fight with her.”

Beren blinked. “*Dying?* Why is she dying?”

“She bled badly after she gave birth to the twins,” Ecthelion sobbed. “Mummy sent a pigeon to Daddy, and Daddy just showed me the message.”

“O dear. O dear.” Beren flapped his hands and turned to the other cartographers. “What does one do in this situation?”

"I have a clean handkerchief?" suggested Gorthil, holding out a very precisely folded linen handkerchief. "He could wipe his eyes with my handkerchief?"

"I will ruin the precise folding," sobbed Ecthelion. "My own handkerchief is all wet! Look at it! The folding is destroyed!" He brandished the sodden item to demonstrate.

"I can redo the folding," said Gorthil, kindly. "In fact, I'd insist upon having it cleaned and then folded again if you've used it."

"Quite right," said Beren. "Did you know that Ecthelion is sometimes happy to use my fork and knife if I've already eaten with it?"

The other three cartographers looked disgusted. "I would only do that if there was no other option," said Thorben.

"Upon further reflection, I shall gently embrace you, Ecthelion," announced Beren. "I have decided that is the best thing to do, but I thought I should *warn* you of my action."

Meanwhile Gorthil scuttled up with the handkerchief and gave it to Ecthelion.

"I'm not the one who needs warning," sniffled Ecthelion, as Beren put his arms gingerly around him. "I am very happy to embrace people, unlike you."

"It is for this reason that we don't understand how the two of you tolerate one another?" said Thorben. "Let along share a house—"

Ecthelion buried his face into Beren's shoulder, while Beren patted Ecthelion's arm very lightly. "I don't understand anything," he howled. "I don't want Idis to die!"

"Is he very close to his sister?" said Targon. "I thought this was the one with whom he fought with all the time, Beren?"

"O, they fight like cats in a sack," said Beren. "They're very similar, you see, and hence they rub each other up the wrong way. I really like Idis, however. I think she's my favourite of Ecthelion's sisters, so I shall be upset if she dies, and very sad for the babies and Almiel and Thor."

Ecthelion let go of Beren and put up his head so he could glare at him. "Idis and I are *not* similar! She is emotional, obsessive and insane."

Targon laughed, so Ecthelion glared at him too for good measure.

"What of the babies anyway?" said Beren. "Did they live?"

"One is a boy and one is a girl, and they are well," said Ecthelion. "I'd rather they died than Idis, I'm afraid. I am inclined to dislike them for killing her."

"Now, I am sure they are perfectly nice babies, given that they have Thor and Idis as parents, and it is not their fault," chided Beren. Then he turned to the other cartographers. "Would you chaps mind if I left early and took Ecthelion home? I think he is really quite overwrought and illogical, which is understandable in the circumstances."

"We can look after things," said Gorthil.

"I'll get your handkerchief washed and get Beren to return it," Ecthelion said to him.

Beren and Ecthelion walked down the hill—it was good to have the use of Gorthil's fresh handkerchief—and Ecthelion railed against the universe. "Why, by the Valar, did they have to have babies again so soon after they had Almiel?"

Beren looked confused. "I should think that is quite obvious, to you of all people? Remember that time in Emyr Arnen—when we went to Thor's room to ask him if he wanted to go fishing—and we found him and Idis—?"

Ecthelion put his hands over his ears. "No! No! I am trying to wipe that image from my head. Although maybe I shouldn't, because if Idis dies, I should at least have a memory of her having fun?"

"She wasn't having fun when she threw Thor's boots at your head," said Beren, seriously.

"O, yes she was, you just do not understand her as well you think!" Ecthelion started to snuffle again. "But did they know there are *ways* of stopping yourself from having children?"

"I should think that they did not, because they would surely have used those methods had they known of them?" said Beren. "Do you remember how we all had to wait to see if Idis was pregnant and whether it was going to be a marriage at swordpoint? And what are those ways?"

Ecthelion started to explain in a low voice, and Beren put his hands over his ears. "Ugh. Enough. It sounds *dirty*, to put something like that over you—"

Ecthelion laughed. "It's not dirty, but I shan't go any further in my explanation."

"It is no wonder I am a happy bachelor," beamed Beren. "With an understanding and tolerant best friend who explains all these things to me."

"Elboron and Cirion are still convinced we're lovers." Ecthelion's two oldest brothers kept taking him aside and saying heartily that they really didn't mind a man who was very good friends with another man, with as long as he was happy and settled, and wasn't Beren a very jolly fellow.

Beren looked thoughtful. "Whereas Idis said to me last time they were back in Gondor that she thought it was good that you had a friend like me who gave you all the steadfast support and affection that you needed, and who didn't care who you slept with. She said it left her feeling much relieved to know that you had me around, and that it was probably just as well that I wasn't interested in intimate conduct because our relationship probably wouldn't work as well otherwise."

Ecthelion stared at Beren. "*My sister* said that to you? That is very insightful." Then he started to cry again.

"O dear," said Beren guiltily. "I never say the right thing at the right moment! But your sister has said to me that she feels the same way."

"Idis is the most tactless person in Middle Earth," snuffled Ecthelion.

"She mostly means well, though," said Beren, as they walked up to their house.

Ecthelion announced to Beren that he had to write a letter to Idis, but that he needed alcohol to do it. "Get out our fine bottle of brandy!" he said, waving his hands.

"I shall, but I'll also put my models away in case you have too much," said Beren with a serious face. The 'models' were tiny replicas of historical battles, all around their house. They drove Ecthelion batty, but he had no doubt that many of his habits drove Beren batty as well, so he put up with them.

Ecthelion sat at his desk in their shared study as Beren solicitously poured him a snifter of brandy. "How do I start the letter?"

"How about 'Dear Idis, I really hope you don't die, and I hope you and Thor and Almiel and the babies are well? Love Ecthelion.'"

"That is a bit *brief* for my liking but it does get to the heart of the matter," said Ecthelion. Then he had a sudden thought, and jumped up and ran to his bedroom, and came back holding a handful of condoms.

"What are they?" said Beren.

"The things I told you about earlier!" said Ecthelion, waving his arms. "I shall suggest that if she survives, they should use some, so she can ensure she doesn't have any more children after this experience. *In fact*, I shall send them these and insist that they use them."

Beren looked at them doubtfully. "Ugh. They are not used, I hope?"

"Certainly *not*," said Ecthelion. "That would be *disgusting*."

He began writing, taking sips of brandy as he went.

Dear Idis,

Daddy told me today that you are very sick after having the twins and that you might not survive. He was crying, so it must be serious. We are glad that Mummy is with you, although I imagine she will fuss over you and drive Arahaelon wild. If you survive, you have to tell me how Mummy and Arahaelon get along. I don't think they will like each other.

I very much hope that you don't die, slightly bigger sister, because actually I quite like to fight with you, and there would be a big hole in my life if you weren't around to fight with, although I hope that next time we fight, you don't throw boots at my head like that time in Emyrn Arnen. Those really hurt my head: I think Thor has hobnails in the bottom of his boots.

Regarding that unfortunate incident involving the boot throwing—which otherwise I do not particularly like to recall—it occurs to me that you and Thor may not know about the use of certain "items" which I enclose with this letter to ensure that you have no more children. If you do recover from this, I think three children in three years is quite enough. Please do not be like Mummy and have one billion children. Otherwise I will worry that you will die every time, and I have already sodden my handkerchief and then the handkerchief of Beren's colleague Gorthil, which is quite inconvenient.

Then he started to cry again and had to mop up blotches, and have a big gulp of brandy.

Anyway, I hope very much that you live, for your sake, for my sake, and for the sake of Thor and Almiel and the babies. I was inclined to dislike the new niece and nephew for killing you—Daddy didn't tell me names?—but Beren said that was illogical and then made me go home which was probably just as well as I was wandering around the corridor crying at strange intervals. He has now got me some Dol Amroth brandy which is really very nice. Did you know that Beren says that you are his favourite out of my sisters? He has this delusion that we are very similar, but I'm sure that you will agree that it is just that: a delusion.

Other than that all is well. Morwen is experimenting with wool types and will bore you silly with it when you return. Húrin's engagement to Princess Elenwë has at last been announced: the worst-kept secret ever. I am at a loss to think how Húrin turned out to be so sensible and boring when both you and I are maybe slightly less sensible?—but maybe it is all part of life's great balance. Gala is expecting another baby: I did also offer Gala and Elboron the "items" which I enclose with this letter and Elboron told me to go away and drown in the Bay of Belfalas. Húrin and I have a theory about Barahir but I won't put it in writing—remind me to tell you about it when you get back. I put this theory to Cirion and he guffawed, but did not confirm or deny it, which makes me think that I am totally right, but you know how those older siblings all hang together like that, in the way which used to irritate us so much when we were little.

The twins are in big trouble with everyone because they apparently knew of Mummy's 'Great Escape'. Daddy was in a terrible mood: I think he was the closest to Grandfather Denethor I have ever seen him, but as I said at the outset, he's now very happy Mummy is with you. How do Beregond and Cannor like foreign parts? I'd laugh to see them both in Harad. In fact, I'd pay money to see it. If you live you have to write back and tell me.

Beren and I are now going to Earnur's. We will have to tell Haleth what happened to you, and I'm sure she will cry. I shall not share Beren's knife and fork if I eat his leftovers, because he does not like it.

With much love and affection, your slightly younger brother Ecthelion

P.S. Please do not die.

P.P.S. I really mean that! I would be bereft.

Then he folded up and sealed his letter and drained the brandy, then poured himself another glass, because he really liked the way it burned when it went down. It suited his mood.

Then he went into the lounge room and said, "Beren! I have finished my letter! I think we should go to Earnur's and have steak."

Beren smiled. "That is an excellent idea, Ecthelion! Let us go!"

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The next morning, Ecthelion woke up with a headache and rolled over to find that there was someone else lying in his bed, asleep. He had a vague recollection that he'd flirted outrageously with

a handsome young criminal defence lawyer last night. He had evidently been successful, because here was the lawyer in his bed.

The lawyer stirred and opened his eyes and smiled. "Good morning Ecthelion."

"Good morning—Herion." Ecthelion really hoped that he'd gotten man's name right—he was tempted to glance over at his consent form to confirm it—but it seemed that he had because the man smiled shyly at him. "I hope I did not behave too outrageously last night?"

"It was fun." Herion grinned. "Do you think that we could—?"

"An excellent idea. Maybe it would get rid of my headache," said Ecthelion, stroking Herion's face.

"I don't think Haleth is ever going to get over you crying on her shoulder," said Herion.

"I did *what*?" said Ecthelion, his hand freezing and his amorous mood momentarily halted.

"Something about your sister being ill, and Haleth cried too—was Haleth, er, a special friend of your sister's?"

"No. Not as far as I know, at any rate? Actually—who knows with regard to my sister?—she has surprised me before, but she is now a married mother of three, if she still lives." Ecthelion kissed Herion. "Can we not talk about her any more?"

Herion smiled languidly. "More than happy not to talk about her."

When they got up, clad in dressing gowns and pyjamas, Beren was in the kitchen, fully dressed, wearing an apron. "Hullo! Would you like some eggs and bacon? Maybe some of that Haradric café that Idis and Thor brought home last time?"

Ecthelion smiled. "Yes please, Beren dear."

Herion looked warily at Beren. Beren smiled at him. "And what is your name again? You're a lawyer, right?"

"Er, my name is Herion, and yes, I'm a criminal defence lawyer," said Herion, sitting slowly.

"I'm used to feeding the people Ecthelion brings home," said Beren. "In fact, I should say that I am very good at it, but that would be boastful."

"You are a very good cook, Beren," said Ecthelion. "You are allowed to be boastful."

In short order, Beren had made café for three people using the little Haradric boiler on the stove. "Do you want milk with it, or are you of the more traditional bent? Ecthelion will have warmed milk, as will I."

"Ah, milk please too," said Herion.

Beren put the café down, and said, "Well. Eggs. Scrambled? Fried? I could do an omelette? We still have some herbs, Ecthelion?"

"Let's do an omelette. I think we have cheese too—unless Herion wants something different?"

"No, an omelette would be nice," said Herion.

"I went and bought fresh bread while you sleepy heads were sleeping in," said Beren. "One slice or two?"

"Two for me," said Ecthelion.

"Just one for me," said Herion.

Beren cut the bread with mathematical precision, and spread it carefully with fresh butter. "Ecthelion does not wield the knife as precisely as I would like. He occasionally makes the bread *crooked*, and that makes me feel ill. Therefore I insist upon being the one to slice it."

Herion rubbed his eyes. "What are all the little tableaux all over the house?"

Beren beamed. "My models! Of historical battles! Do you want to see my model of the King of the Nazgûl? It has wings that flap."

"Remember how you showed it to Thor when Idis first brought him to Emyr Arnen—?" said Ecthelion, and then paused and choked a little.

"Idis might not die," said Beren, waving the spatula at him. "She might get well again. Your mother is there to look after her. Just wait and see!"

Ecthelion sipped at his café. "Mmmm."

"Is this your sister?" said Herion.

"Yes, she's in Harad—she and her husband are diplomats there—she just gave birth to twins, and she—" Ecthelion paused because his eyes were watering, and clamped his jaw shut to stop himself from crying.

"Ah," said Herion. "I hope she gets well soon."

"The omelette has been mixed," announced Beren.

"Very good," said Ecthelion, encouragingly.

"We could get our cook to make breakfast, but I quite enjoy it," said Beren.

"I know you do," said Ecthelion. "That's why I let you do it."

Herion looked back and forth between them. "How long have you two ... lived together?"

Beren beamed. "Seven years! Ecthelion has put up with me for seven years! Almost eight! And to think Uncle Halmir thought you might strangle me, Ecthelion?"

"Your Uncle Halmir is a pig," said Ecthelion. "He was not a good father, nor a good uncle."

"No, he wasn't very nice to poor Arahaelon," said Beren sadly. "Arahaelon is my cousin, Herion. He works in Harad too, with Idis and Thor. How do you think he is doing, Ecthelion?"

"I imagine Arahaelon is distraught and fed up," said Ecthelion, starting on his second piece of bread. "He has to deal with my mother, a dying Idis, two very small babies, a toddler, a presumably distraught Thor, and that silly dog of Nallon and Baradir's. O, and add to that the Emperor of Harad, his mother, and the Khandians."

"Arahaelon pretends not to like the dog," said Beren.

"No, he really does think Moriel is a rat," said Ecthelion. "He's a cat person, if he had to have a pet."

"I'm also a cat person," said Herion.

Ecthelion brightened as an excellent idea came to him. "You should meet Arahaelon, next time he's back from Harad! *Beren!* Don't you think Herion might like Arahaelon?"

Beren carefully flipped the omelette with the spatula. "The question is, will Arahaelon like Herion, or will he be in a grumpy phase?"

"That's not the question I am considering. The question I have is this: who is going to kill bad Khandians if Idis dies?" said Ecthelion, sadly.

Herion blinked. "What did the Khandians do to deserve being killed by your sister?"

"O, they tried to assassinate Thor, and then they tried to assassinate the Emperor of Harad or some such," said Beren airily. "I really think it was most rude of them to randomly hit Thor over the head and stab and poison him, don't you, Ecthelion?"

Ecthelion sniggered. "Assassins don't tend to be polite, Beren. That's the point. They don't come up and warn you: 'Hullo, Thorongil, I am here to assassinate you.'"

"Thorongil?" said Herion, with confusion. "What poor person is burdened with that name?"

"Idis's husband," said Beren. "He's terribly nice! But for this reason he prefers to be called Thor."

"His brother has it worse. He is called ... Denethor," said Ecthelion. "You might know him, given that you're a lawyer. He's a judge."

Herion stared. "O! Judge Denethor. He mainly does commercial matters. *Terribly* pompous man who's almost bald?"

"Interestingly, Thor is the opposite," said Beren. "I wonder why that is? I mean, he's not bald, he's not pompous, he's not fat and he's not tall."

Ecthelion sighed. "He *is* very pretty."

Beren slid slices of omelette onto plates and then came up and slapped Ecthelion gently on the shoulder with the spatula. "No, Ecthelion. No!"

"If Idis lives, you're not allowed to tell her I said that about Thor," said Ecthelion guiltily. "But—can I make it clear—I was speaking from an objective point of view, not a lustful point of view?"

"Personally I think his hair is the same colour as a red squirrel's," said Beren, putting the plates down. "You know the ones you see in Ithilien? But I have never wanted to point that out to him, because I don't know if he would find it flattering. What do you think, Herion?"

Herion blinked. "I don't know that I'd necessarily want my hair compared with squirrel fur. And that's an unusual colour, no?"

"Idis says Thor's got no idea how pretty he is, and is very self-conscious about his colouring," said Ecthelion. "Apparently he got called 'changeling' and 'half-breed' when he was a boy."

"People are very mean." Beren looked sad. "I got called 'weird' and Arahaelon got called 'pansy' when we were boys."

"I cannot recall that anyone called me anything other than Thel or Thelly," said Ecthelion. "But it helps that if anyone had said anything rude about me, Elboron, Finduilas and Cirion would have beaten them up. I suppose it is good having three extremely scary oldest siblings."

"I got called 'pansy' too," said Herion, shrugging. Then he snorted with laughter. "The other day I was assigned to defend someone charged with affray, and it turned out it was one of the fellows who teased me when I was a child. I said to him, 'O well, I suppose I'd better leave you without a defence lawyer because you'd hardly like to be defended by a pansy?' And I had the pleasure of the man begging me to defend him, and apologising for teasing me."

Ecthelion chuckled. "O, that's glorious! Simply glorious!"

They finished their omelettes, and then Herion stood and gave a little bow. "Well, this has been most pleasant, and lovely to meet you both, but I should go home."

"Please do come stay the night again!" said Beren. "I have to show you my scrambled eggs! And you never saw the flapping Nazgûl model yet!"

"It was *my* line to invite him to stay the night again," said Ecthelion, sulkily. "You stole it, Beren dear."

"Sorry, Ecthelion," said Beren, looking totally unrepentant. "But isn't it better if it comes from both of us?"

"Anyway, you are always welcome to visit again," said Ecthelion, smiling at Herion flirtatiously, as he took him to the door.

Herion smiled back with a pleasing degree of lust, and they kissed. "Noted."

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A week later, Ecthelion was back in his father's office. His father looked at him and smiled kindly. "I have good news for you. I got a pigeon just before. Idis is doing much better. Mummy thinks she is rallying."

Ecthelion beamed at his father. “Excellent!” Then he said in a whisper. “I sent them a letter and some of Cousin Amrothos’s ‘devices’ with the diplomatic bag, so they don’t have any more children. I could not bear this again.”

His father shrugged, and his mouth quirked. “It has been interesting having you visit my office several times a day, son. I’m not accustomed to it.”

“I worry—” said Ecthelion, waving his hands.

“I know,” said Faramir. “You are a good brother.”

Ecthelion suddenly had to blink back tears. “I don’t know if I am, Father. That’s what I have been worried about? That—I was not actually a very good brother to Idie—sometimes I found her very vexing?”

“She sent you a message,” said his father. “I may have communicated to your mother that you were worried, and she must have told Idis.”

Ecthelion stared at his father. “*Idis* sent a message? For *me*?”

“Yes. I don’t think she’d do that for a bad brother, do you?” His father handed over a little rolled parchment. “I didn’t read it.”

Ecthelion hastily unfolded it. His sister’s hand was far less firm and neat than usual, he noted with worry.

Dear Thelly, Daddy says you are worried. This is very sweet. I hope Iarwain and Ioreth are like us. With love, Idis

Ecthelion blinked back tears. “Who are Iarwain and Ioreth?”

“Her twins,” said his father, shaking his head. “Iarwain seems a silly name to me, but it’s a very Idis joke: apparently the boy was born first, so he’s the elder of the two. Your mother is *very* excited because they appear to have blond hair. I don’t want to point out that sometimes children have blond hair and it turns darker. Your mother also tells me that she has been forcing Idis to drink copious amounts of buckwheat soup, to replace the blood she lost, and is having fights with a Haradric midwife who doesn’t speak any Westron, so they gesture at each other.”

“Ugh, poor Idis,” said Ecthelion. “I hate that Rohirric buckwheat soup.”

His father’s mouth twitched again. “Meanwhile apparently Cannor doesn’t think the curry in Harad is as good as what he can get at the Sword and Goblet. Your mother wasted a pigeon to tell me this, prompting a complaint from Lord Arahaelon, but I have to say that it did brighten my mood.”

Ecthelion burst out laughing, and clapped. “O! This is marvellous! This *just* fits with my vision of Cannor in Harad.”

His father chuckled. “Exactly.”

* * * * *

Two months later, Ecthelion was feeling much happier. Idis had pulled through, the irritating babies had lived, and he felt quite proud of himself for giving Idis and Thor the means of preventing any more babies from the existing. His older brother Cirion had been agog when Ecthelion had told him.

"She might throw daggers at you and purposefully miss," he had warned Ecthelion. "I did try to advise her on the use of contraceptive devices while she was waiting to see if she needed a swordpoint wedding, and she just gave me a *look*—you know the look I mean?"

"That one like she wishes to skewer you?" Ecthelion.

"*That* one," confirmed Cirion.

Ecthelion had just spent a very pleasant night with Herion, and as promised, Beren was preparing scrambled eggs for the three of them, when there was a knock at the door.

Ecthelion went to the door, and discovered his mother, looking slightly sunburned in weather stained riding outfit, and holding a big bag. "Hullo, darling! I'm back! I got back yesterday!"

"O, hullo, Mummy, we are just having breakfast," said Ecthelion, awkwardly. "Our friend Herion is visiting us because Beren promised to show him how he does bacon and eggs."

"That's nice," said Éowyn, and pushed past him into the corridor. "I bring gifts and letters!" Then she strode into the kitchen while Ecthelion followed her and wrung his hands uselessly. He had ascertained long before that telling his mother she was not welcome *right now* did not work, and in fact, often had the opposite effect to what he desired.

"Hullo!" said his mother, brightly, to Beren and Herion.

"Greetings Lady Éowyn," said Beren.

"O, I've told you before, Beren, just call me Éowyn," said his mother, and kissed Beren very gently on the top of his head, as Ecthelion had warned her that Beren did not like too much physical contact.

"Er," said Herion, looking horrified, and Ecthelion gave him an 'I'm very sorry look'.

"Are you the friend who likes bacon and eggs?" said Éowyn.

"Yes!" said Beren. "Today he got scrambled eggs with chives on top! His name is Herion, by the way, and he's a lawyer."

"Lovely to meet you," said his mother, sitting at the table.

"Do you want scrambled eggs too?" said Beren.

"No, no, I had something at the Steward's House earlier." His mother took the bag off her shoulder and put it on her lap and started unloading things.

"You could come back later, Mummy?" said Ecthelion. "Because we *were* having breakfast with our friend."

"No time like now," said his mother, briskly, piling packages on the breakfast table. "I shan't be long."

"What is all this?" said Ecthelion.

"Presents!" said his mother. "Did you know that I met the mother of the Emperor of Harad, Ecthelion? And—she is attended at all times by a gelded servant? They *geld* men, like horses. Is that not barbaric? But otherwise she is quite nice because she is Nilofar's niece, and she did send that strange midwife to help Idie."

"How is Idis?" said Ecthelion.

"Getting back to normal." His mother's face shadowed. "It was touch and for the first four days in particular, but luckily she's a strong and brave girl, and drank her buckwheat soup."

"How did Thor take it?" said Beren.

"Very badly, but he was also very brave, because he had to be, for Almiel's sake. She's a very sweet little girl, and she loves her Grandmammy. She cried and cried when I left." His mother looked both satisfied and sad at this.

"How did you know that the servant of the mother of the Emperor of Harad was gelded?" said Herion, curiously.

"I asked him," said Éowyn. "I thought from the first that he looked odd—beardless and strangely girlish?—apparently they did it when he was very young and he doesn't remember. Idie tells me that he's a very decent fellow for all that, the poor man."

Ecthelion put his head in his hands. "You *asked* this man?"

"I was interested in the procedure used from a medical perspective, but then Idis stopped me from asking any more," said his mother with dissatisfaction, making snipping motions in the air. "Apparently I was scaring him and the Empress Mother."

"By the Valar!" said Ecthelion. "I have no doubt that you were scaring them, Mummy. You forget how scary you are."

"Also it's not prawns," said his mother, gnomically. "The reason all those babies died in the harem was because *other consorts murdered them*, did you know? The Empress Mother says she will ensure this never happens again in her son's harem."

Herion blinked. "So the harem is as vicious as it is rumoured to be in the tales?"

"Apparently so. I mean, what a stupid idea, having all these women competing to be the most powerful and to have their child be the Emperor! It struck me afterwards that *of course* this would happen." Éowyn plonked a parchment down on the table. "Idie wrote you a letter, Ecthelion. And there are some drawings from Almiel as well on the bottom of it."

Beren squinted. "How is the Empress Mother going to stop the harem ladies killing babies—it sounds somewhat inevitable from what you say? It reminds me of when I was little and I caught some fish in the pond and put them in a glass bowl, and then all the fish ate the other fish until I only had one big

fish left and I cried, because I did not want to be left with the cannibal fish, so Mummy tipped it back in the pond. This was before Mummy and Daddy died and I had to go live with Uncle Halmir, obviously."

"The Empress Mother is selecting amiable, beautiful and stupid girls, and scrutinising them closely. If they try to hurt or kill another child or consort they shall be exiled," said Éowyn, with approval. "I'm sure there will still be incidents, because people are people, but I feel satisfied that she'll deal with it appropriately. The Empress Mother admitted to me that she really did not smack the Emperor enough, by the way, and said she regretted it later, but that she spoiled him because it was such a horrid life in the harem back then."

"Right," said Ecthelion, faintly. "What did Arahaelon think of this conversation?"

"He is a tremendous grump," said her mother, frowning. "He kept telling me that I wasn't to do various things, or to talk to various people, but of course I ignored him."

Beren laughed with delight. "He is very bossy like that."

"He is really very nice!" Ecthelion folded his arms: Beren and his mother were *destroying* his plan to set up Herion and Arahaelon. "I think you would like him, Herion. It is just that he hides his soft heart under a gruff manner."

His mother clapped her hands. "Well! Open your presents?"

"You can open some too, so you don't feel left out," said Beren to Herion, as he unwrapped a bundle. "Oooh, a nice silk hanging?"

"A box of *café*?" said Herion, inspecting a wooden box curiously, and sniffing it.

"Very good, our *café* store was getting low." Ecthelion blinked. "A bright orange *djelebi*?"

"There are many irritating things about Harad: heat, flies, food that gives you diarrhoea, sand. But one thing that was very nice was the fact that they wear bright colours. Incidentally, the courtyard men are now convinced I am some kind of Rohirric goddess, I don't know how?"

Ecthelion laughed and laughed. "They already worshipped Idis, so now they just worship her mother too. They were most cross when I said something which sounded vaguely critical of her."

"Ooh, look, lots of spices?" said Beren. "Hurrah! I shall be able to use this cinnamon."

"You can have some cinnamon too if you want," Ecthelion said to Herion. "Just tell us if you want some spices. Or if you have a yen to wear an orange *djelebi*?"

"I got a matching *djelebi*! In turquoise!" said Beren.

"I thought you boys could wear them as nightshirts if you don't want to wear them in public," said his mother. "Something nice and bright to wear to bed?"

Ecthelion unwrapped a heavy bundle. "A soapstone statue of a *mûmak*?"

"I could put it in one of my battle scenes, but it's a bit large," said Beren sadly. "It's not really to scale."

Ecthelion stood and put it on the bench, then made it run around making trumpeting noises. "I think it likes looking down from our kitchen bench, Beren!"

"I do not think it does, Ecthelion. I like my kitchen bench to be bare, as you well know. I think you are just doing this to vex me?"

"I never do anything to vex anyone," said Ecthelion, and then yelped as his mother leaned over and slapped him on the calf.

"Be nice to your friend, vexatious child!" his mother said. Then she put her hands under her chin and looked hopeful. "There is still no way—?"

"No!" said Beren and Ecthelion simultaneously.

"Huh?" said Herion.

"I'll explain later," said Ecthelion.

"I should probably get back to your father—he's still a little annoyed at me for leaving," his mother said, somewhat guiltily. "But it was lovely to see you, boys."

Ecthelion stood. "I'll show you out, Mother. And likewise, I am so glad you got home safely, and that Idis is well."

He escorted his mother out, kissed her, and then shut the door firmly before she could come back in and ran back to the kitchen.

"Sorry about that. I can't say no to her. *No one* can say no to her. Not even my father."

"It was most interesting and entertaining," said Herion. "What was she asking you before?"

Ecthelion sighed. "She has this idea that it would be terribly sweet if Beren and I were lovers, and keeps trying to encourage it, but the whole point is that this works because we *aren't* lovers."

"I was wondering," said Herion.

"We are just very good friends in the non-euphemistic sense," said Beren. "Imagine my shock when I learned from Ecthelion's parents that 'very good friends' was a euphemism for something else? And all these years I'd been saying Ecthelion was my very good friend, and people had *quite* misunderstood."

"We haven't bothered enlightening Uncle Halmir as to the non-euphemistic nature of our friendship," said Ecthelion, smiling evilly. "He can think what he wants. I hope that he thinks we are living in sin and getting up to all kinds of appalling things."

"But I have told you before that I don't like being hit with paddles," said Beren with confusion. "Surely Uncle Halmir would know that?"

"I don't know what he knows, and it pleases me to think that he might be horrified," said Ecthelion, folding his arms.

"You just looked exactly like your mother." Herion put his head on the side, curiously.

"Well, that's natural," said Ecthelion. "Would you mind terribly if I read this letter from my sister?"

"Be my guest," said Herion. "But is there any more café?"

Beren leapt up, beaming. "I shall make some!"

Meanwhile Ecthelion broke the seal on his sister's letter.

Dear Thelly,

Thank you very much for your lovely letter. It made me cry. As I expect Daddy has told you (via pigeon) it looks like I will survive and therefore I will still be around to throw boots at your head upon another occasion.

It was very scary after the birth—I was so worried that I'd be leaving Thor and the children—and that I'd never get to know these two new little people I'd brought into the world. Thor wept when he thought I was sleeping. I felt so very weak that at times I could not even open my eyes, and I could barely lift my arm. Don't feel angry at the babies: it's not their fault. Ioreth and Iarwain are really sweet but very bald except for a little white golden fluff like a dandelion. They're always hungry at the same time. We have had to get a wet nurse. Thor, Mummy and Amaya (the Empress Mother) ganged up on me.

I am not very good at being sick. I really don't like it. I hate being stuck in bed and not able to do things. Thor has been teaching me Khandian in more detail just to make sure that I stop trying to get up and out of bed. He got quite cross with me, so I knew it was very serious. He made the courtyard men tell on me if I tried to creep out of our room, and they did.

Mummy and Arahaelon really do not get along, as you intuited. Mummy ignored all Arahaelon's commands, and started asking Chief Eunuch Ferzil how he became a eunuch, and asking Empress Mother Amaya about prawns, and threatening to smack the Emperor of Harad and make him pick up horse dung. Luckily Amaya and Ferzil seemed to be entertained more than anything else—I had warned them well beforehand when Mummy first threatened to visit what she is like. Then once I was better she marched all over the city buying scads of terrible knickknacks. I believe you may be receiving matching djelebi? She bought approximately 50 and then said, "If these are too many, your father can wear them for night shirts." Poor Daddy. Mummy also has a yen for incredibly twee soapstone carvings of animals, so be warned. Will you get a horse, a hippopotamus, an aurochs or a mûmak? That is the question.

Cannor and Beregonde have behaved exactly as one might imagine: they found Haradric food sadly disappointing and not as the curry at the Sword and Goblet. Beregonde got horrendously sunburned, and thinks he has sweated off a stone in weight. He is really quite happy, however, because I think he was bored in retirement. Apparently Cannor gets seasick so they all had to go by road: as you know, Mummy gets seasick too, just like you do, so it's likely just as well. I only ever get seasick when I'm pregnant—that is actually how I worked out that the twins might be in existence at a very early point—we were on the way to Harad

and I was really ill on the boat over. By the time we arrived at Beyazim, I was almost certain I was pregnant.

Thank you very much for the “items” you sent us. You can be assured that we will use them. Thor was saying that he was not going to sleep with me again for some time, because he was so traumatised by what happened, and also, a bit overcome by all these children: we have gone from no children to three children in a remarkably short space of time. And to think at one point I feared I would not be able to have children? Not that we are able to do much intimate right now anyway—we are too tired, even if I hadn’t been so ill—but when we are, we will be grateful.

Please do go to Earnur’s and tell Haleth I’m well again. Also I have an idea for another cocktail, which involves lime juice, and coconut juice, but it might be a while before I’m back and can tell her. Tell her anyway, so I don’t forget. And have a Minas Tirith Martini for me.

Much love, your slightly bigger sister Idis.

P.S. I think you are totally right about Barahir, if you are thinking what I’m thinking. Very big seven month baby, my elbow! I guess I can’t point the finger, can I? This may also explain why Bron just laughed after he heard about what happened with me and Thor—I do hope you believe me now that I didn’t mean to do that right then but once I’d taken my clothing off—it just happened. To be frank I was a little worried that Bron or Cirion might be cross with Thor, but they weren’t at all.

P.P.S. Don’t tell the older ones we have worked this out about Barahir! Middle children secret!

P.P.P.S. Beren’s idea that we are similar is indeed ridiculous, for all that Thor laughed like a hyaena when I told him of it. I don’t know if you came across them in the War in Harad, but they have an annoying hooting laugh. Love ~I

After this followed some terrible scratchy scribbles and a brief note from Thor to explain that these scribbles were Almiel’s *mûmakil* and that he hoped Beren and Ecthelion were well.

Ecthelion laughed and wiped his eyes. “Hah! Hah! I knew it.”

“What did you know?” said Beren.

“That Mummy and Arahaelon rubbed each other up the wrong way, that Cannor thinks Haradric food in Gondor is more authentic than Haradric food in Harad, and that Beregond got sunburned,” said Ecthelion. “Also another suspicion regarding my brother Elboron has been confirmed, but that’s a middle child secret.”

“Not fair,” said Beren. Then he brightened. “I’m a middle child! You can tell me!”

“No you’re not. You’re an only child!”

“I am a middle child. I’m also the eldest child and the youngest child, all in one. I’m all of them!”

Herion laughed. “Very clever.”