

Senior Advocate Denethor was glad to leave his chambers. It had been a long day in court, and he was tired, and looked forward to putting his feet up. As he got home, the butler removed his coat.

"Warning, sir," Beren warned Denethor in a low voice. "My Lady has had the meeting with the Orphan's Fund today."

Denethor grimaced at Beren. "O no. She shall be in a foul mood."

"You did not hear so from me," breathed the butler.

"Quite so. I appreciate the warning that I certainly never received from you," said Denethor.

The butler tipped his head. "We all have to work together, sir."

Denethor went up to his room and his valet changed him into evening gear. He came down to have aperitifs with his wife, Lúthien, feeling slightly apprehensive. His mood shifted when he saw Ciryandil and Hyarmendacil were there too, faces clean and beaming.

"Hullo boys!" he said to his sons.

"Hullo Daddy!" they chorused.

Denethor kissed his wife Lúthien's smooth, scented cheek. He could tell that she wished to scowl, but she would not do so, because it was not a well-bred thing to do, and it might mark her brow with a wrinkle. Over a decade years later, he still could not believe that a beautiful noblewoman had accepted his hand in marriage; but he knew that she was similarly agog that a talented young advocate had accepted her hand when she had not a penny to her name, so they were even.

He lowered himself into a chair. "Come, give your old father a hug, boys."

The boys hugged him in turn, and Denethor marvelled at their existence. Lúthien had had miscarriages both before Ciryandil, and in between Ciryandil and Hyarmendacil. They had despaired of having children, and then despaired of producing a sibling for Ciryandil. Denethor regarded both sons as miraculous, but he was not going to let them see that. It might spoil them. As far as he could see, Lúthien was spoiling them enough as it was.

"How was court, dear?" Lúthien asked, turning elegantly.

"Fine," said Denethor. "I was opposed to Egalmoth the Younger today."

"You're often opposed to him, are you not?" Lúthien raised a perfect brow.

"Indeed." Denethor permitted himself a small smile. "I believe it is known in the legal community that I can give him a run for his money, even if I am not noble, and do not run in that set. I hope I did so today."

"Well, at least there is some positive news, darling," said Lúthien.

"Mummy is in a mood," Ciryandil whispered in Denethor's ear.

"What was that?" said Lúthien.

"Ciryandil was just ... telling me what he learned in Sindarin lessons today, weren't you lad?" Denethor met his son's eyes.

"Yes, I was talking about trees," said Ciryandil, pleasing Denethor with his quick understanding.

Lúthien relaxed again. "I am so happy my boys are doing well."

The butler came in with the drinks. Denethor had asked for a whiskey and soda: Lúthien had something more elaborate in a strange glass. There was an *olive* in it.

"What is that, dear?" said Denethor, staring at the glass.

"It is a Minas Tirith Martini. Don't you know, it's all the rage?" Lúthien held out the glass.

Denethor squinted. "Is that...sugar...on the rim?"

"No, salt," said Lúthien.

"Still. Looks a bit girlish to me," grunted Denethor. "What's with the olive?"

"It's the latest thing. I told Beren to use one of those pickled ones that Mama sent us, and really they do very well—"

"Humph," said Denethor.

"You don't want a small sip?" It was one of Lúthien's oddities that she loved to share her food and drink with Denethor. He was not quite sure why. Still, to keep her happy, he gingerly took the glass, and took a sip.

"The salt makes it quite piquant," he said, handing the glass back to Lúthien.

"Just so, and you'll have to write to tell Mama the olives were useful," said Lúthien.

"Do I recall," said Denethor—displaying all the caution of one about to rip a dressing off a wound—but he thought it was better to do it sooner than later, "that you had the Orphan's Fund meeting today?"

Lúthien sat up, her eyes flashing. "I did. And you will not believe what Lady Aredhel said *this time*—!"

"What did she say, my love?"

Lúthien's nostrils tightened and white creases developed next to her nose. "She said—she *said*—that she thought the girls should be sent to work in the laundries!"

Denethor frowned. "But—that is punishment for the girls, is it not? I thought 'twas only, er, fallen women who did that?"

"Quite," said Lúthien.

"How did the women fall?" said Ciryandil.

“Ah—” said Denethor, in panic.

“They slipped on the wet floor,” said Lúthien, briskly, shooting a glare at Denethor. “It is quite dangerous in the laundry. Let that be a warning to you, boys.”

“My brother Forlong actually once did break my other brother Berion’s arm when they were skating around Mama’s laundry on a washboard,” noted Denethor. “It can be dangerous.”

“I’m sure your Mama was *most* vexed with them,” said Lúthien.

“More resigned than vexed. I did warn them—I said, ‘You’ll break your arms, boys!’—but did they listen to me?—of course, they did not. None of my brothers did.” Denethor wondered if his outlook had been affected by the fact that he was the product of Mama’s first marriage, and his four brothers the product of her second marriage to Papa, not that Papa had ever let this affect the way in which he treated Denethor.

“Most foolish of them, and I am so glad that our boys are *sensible* and take after you, dearest, not your brothers—” Lúthien took a deep breath. “Denethor, about Lady Aredhel—do you know what really gets my goat—?”

Denethor mentally sighed at the use of the phrase—it was apparently the current ‘in’ thing among Lúthien’s friends—a phrase borrowed from the young bucks who frequented the racecourse and gambling dens. He was unable to understand why they adopted strange phrases of this kind.

“—Calagalagon da Black,” said Hyarmendacil.

Lúthien blinked and turned to Hyarmendacil. “Excuse me, my love?”

“Calagalagon da Black.” Hyarmendacil nodded. “Biggest dragon there ever was.”

“He would roast it,” said Ciryandil, with satisfaction.

“I do beg your pardon?” said Denethor to the boys.

Ciryandil sighed. “The goat.” Then he turned to Hyarmendacil. “It’s not Calagalagon. It’s Ancalalagon.”

“I don’t think that’s right either,” said Hyarmendacil.

“In any case, what really gets my goat—” continued Lúthien.

“—is Ancalalagon!” Ciryandil beamed. “He roasts it! Uncle Gilly told us so.”

“O by the Valar,” said Denethor. “What has my youngest brother Thorongil been up to now?”

The two boys looked at each other. “So—when Mummy says, ‘You know what really gets my goat—?’ Uncle Gilly told us to say that a dragon gets her goat. And you know what? He’s *right*. That dragon would get a goat, really quickly. We looked him up in a book.”

“Well, *really!*” said Lúthien, putting a hand to her brow. “This is just the *pip!* I think I am developing a headache!”

Denethor sighed. “Boys—don’t listen to Uncle Gil. First, it’s *Ancalagon*—”

“—Yeah!” said Hyarmendacil. “*That’s* the name he said—”

“—Secondly, Uncle Gil is very silly.”

“But you told us Uncle Gilly was very bright and got the best result ever in the public service exams, and we should be like him when we grew up?” said Ciryandil.

“I did not mean you to be *exactly* like him. Sometimes he is a bit *silly*,” said Denethor.

“When is Thorongil going to marry and settle down?” said Lúthien. “Really, he very much needs a *sensible* woman.”

“He’s not going to find one in the Gondor Embassy to Harad, or at all, if he keeps going as he does,” sighed Denethor. “Really, I do not see why he could not have gone to Justice, rather than become a diplomat. Why Lord Arahaelon had to claim rights, I do not know, but I do know Lord Justice Carandir was reportedly in a *tremendous* snit about it for months.”

Beren the butler came in. “Dinner is served, my Lady, sir?”

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Several days later, Lúthien unbent from her fury enough to invite Denethor’s youngest half-brother Lord Thorongil of Galaridh, fourth son of Lord Beren of Galaridh, around to dinner.

Thorongil came late, as was his wont, but he bore a lovely bunch of flowers and some Haradric Delight, so Lúthien forgave him.

“Haradric Delight is very much *in* at the moment,” she said to Thorongil across the dining room.

Thorongil kissed her cheek as he handed her the flowers, then blinked several times. “Is it, Lúthien? Well, then, what a very *lucky* chance I brought it for you! I like the rose-flavoured one. Next time I can get you a few boxes, including the vanilla and the pistachio-flavoured ones—?”

“That would be kind, *very* kind,” said Lúthien. “How is Gondor’s Embassy to Harad going?”

Thorongil looked vague. “Very much as always? The Khandians are making a fuss, but then—that’s typical.” His face brightened. “Can you believe it—when I was in Khand with Lord Arahaelon recently, a fellow got assassinated *on the toilet*?”

Ciryandil and Hyarmendacil snickered—they’d been allowed to the beginning of dinner, simply to see their favourite uncle—and Denethor began to regret it sorely.

Lúthien snapped at the boys. “*Boys!*”

“*On the toilet*, though!” said Ciryandil.

“Spear up through that hole in the toilet, where people do their business, right into the man’s liver,” said Thorongil, cheerfully, ruffling the hair on the boys’ heads. “Glad I don’t live there, aren’t you? I’d have to check every time I went.”

The boys grasped each other as they became hysterical with delight and horror.

“*Gil!*” Denethor was seriously concerned, as Lúthien looked like she was about to explode.

“Do you know what gets my goat—?” she began.

“—Calagalagon da Black!” said Hyarmendacil, triumphantly, meeting Gil’s eyes.

Thorongil bit his lip, his unusual green eyes gleaming with glee, and gave Hyarmendacil a small round of applause. “You remembered!”

“‘Cept it’s Ancalala—Ancala?” said Ciryandil.

“Ancalagon,” said Thorongil, gently. “Ancalagon the Black. He would get a goat, if he so wished. Or a pony, or a Dwarf, or a Man, for that matter. He could not, however, have melted the One Ring, which is interesting, is it not—?”

“*Gil!*” repeated Denethor again.

Thorongil looked at him, his eyes wide, limpid, radiating innocence, the slightly Elfin features he’d inherited from Mama making him look young and sweet. “Yes? It’s true! Apparently the possibility of using dragons for destroying the Ring was discussed and discarded, along with letting it sit on the bottom of the Sea—”

Denethor was not their Mama. He did not believe this innocent act *one bit*. He said, “Boys, I think it is time for bed. Go to Nurse and she will put you to bed.”

“Aw, Daddy!” moaned the boys. “We want to stay up and see Uncle Gilly! And have some Haradric Delight!”

“Mummy will save you some,” said Lúthien through gritted teeth, still somewhat rigid with rage.

“I’ll come around another time, in the day,” Thorongil promised the boys. “Maybe I’ll take you to the park.”

“You can teach them Haradric.” Lúthien brightened.

“He did teach us already,” said Ciryandil, and then said something which sounded, to Denethor’s ears, rather percussive and unpleasant.

“Don’t actually *say* that one to Haradrim,” said Thorongil, hastily, waving his hands. “Never! *Ever!* That’s just one for you and me, boys? I’ll teach you the greetings and so forth—”

“What does it mean?” said Denethor suspiciously.

“*Very* difficult to translate,” said Thorongil, blinking and pushing his tousled auburn hair out of his eyes. “About donkeys! I assure you, it doesn’t involve goats.”

"Humph," said Denethor.

The boys kissed everyone at the table, and reluctantly left the dining room, as Nurse drew them off.

"Well," said Denethor. "Gil, you are a monster. A perfect *Balrog* of a brother!"

"No, I'm not really. We got up to much worse when we were young, Den?"

Lúthien shuddered. "I *hate* to think, Thorongil."

"I did not," said Denethor repressively. "I was *sensible*."

"Alas," said Thorongil. "Although what about that time I persuaded you to have the backwards horse race?"

"I almost *died*," said Denethor, rubbing his hip at the memory.

"I had to give you *some* leeway," said Thorongil, fairly. "I mean, horses aren't really your thing? So if we both rode the horses facing the other way, it was more fair." He paused. "It was a bit alarming, I agree, particularly when the horses decided to leap the gate. The thing is, Den, you have to grip on with your thighs, not just your hands."

"My buttocks hurt for *weeks*, after that tumble," grumbled Denethor. "And the other brothers laughed at us."

"I threatened to beat them all with fire pokers if they continued, and as they aren't a patch on me with a sword, they all shut up soon enough," Thorongil noted.

"I am sure that my sisters and I never *thought* of such things," gasped Lúthien.

"Well, I don't really know, because I'm not married, and we don't have sisters, but I do feel that girls are a little different to boys," Thorongil observed. "Boys are more likely to break bones, and punch each other, and so forth. Girls, in my observation, are more likely to pull each other's hair, say mean things and cry at each other."

"Humph." An imp of mischief pricked Denethor. "That actually describes the Orphan's Fund meetings rather well, does it not, Lúthien?"

Lúthien pulled herself up. "We do not pull hair!"

"I'd wager you *think* about it," said Thorongil, sagely. "I'm sure I would. That Lady Aredhel could do with a sharp tug on her well-coiffed locks, for example. A most unpleasant, judgmental woman, I've always thought."

To Denethor's surprise, Lúthien stifled a giggle. "Gilly, you are very *naughty*!"

"Just so," said Thorongil, a deceptively amiable expression on his face.

"How do we stop the boys going on about dragons and goats?" Denethor asked, as they sipped the cream of asparagus soup Lúthien had decided to serve as an entrée.

Thorongil shrugged and put his spoon down. "I don't have the faintest idea. I'm not a parent. I didn't even think they'd recall to do it! Rather clever of them, don't you think?"

"Humph." Denethor grunted at his youngest brother. "One day, I hope all this comes back to bite you, when you have children. And we shall laugh at you."

His brother smiled back. "I rather expect so. The Khandians say—" He broke into hissing speech, then leaned back, looking thoughtful.

Denethor and Lúthien waited expectantly. Eventually Lúthien said, "But what does it *mean*, Gil?"

Thorongil startled from his reverie. "O! I forgot you don't speak Khandian! It means, *If we sow good, we reap goodness. If we sow evil, we reap evil.*"

"Profound," said Denethor, patting his head with dismay: he was sure his hair had thinned even more since last week. He looked somewhat jealously at his brother's full head of hair: it did not seem to be thinning in the least.

"If they think evil things happen if one does evil, why are they so evil, then? Surely you weren't being truthful about the *bathroom assassination*?" Lúthien asked.

"Indeed I was. And I didn't even get to the part about how someone assassinated the Deputy Priest in full view of everyone at a religious ceremony, with some kind of blow dart painted to look like a bee or a wasp, we think. They have a different idea of what's good and what's evil. In my view, what they think is good is *quite* immoral and distasteful, but they'd say the same of me."

"Humph. I still think you'd be better in Justice," Denethor moaned, as the main course was being served, "if these are the kind of thoughts you have."

Thorongil scowled as he looked at the chicken leg on his plate. "Don't be like Papa, Denny. Next thing you'll be telling me to take the Magistracy just down the road in Lossarnach."

"I'd never do that," said Denethor, disapprovingly, glaring at his brother for using his most hated nickname. It was bad enough being named after the late insane Ruling Steward as it was. "You mistake me quite. We both exercised considerable effort to *escape* the confines of Galaridh!"

Thorongil relaxed and prodded his meal with his fork. "Good. I'm a city man, through and through, regardless of the realm in which I dwell. What's this with the chicken, by the way? Is it dried apricot? Most interesting flavour—"

"Gilly," said Lúthien wheedlingly. "I was wondering if you wanted to come for afternoon tea next weekend?"

Thorongil sat up like a hunted hare, and put down his knife and fork with a clink. "I am afraid that I find that I am busy."

"With what are you busy?" said Lúthien, steel in her voice.

"I don't actually know *yet*," confessed Thorongil, disarmingly, "but given the disaster that was my afternoon tea with Lady Aerin, I will find something to ensure I am busy, Lúthien."

Lúthien *tsked*. “You did not even *speak* to her! You just stared at her and said *yes* and *no*. She did not believe me at all when I said you are ordinarily most charming and pleasant.”

“She had an alarming décolleté,” said Thorongil, picking up his cutlery again. “I could not but notice that her bosom kept heaving! I was keeping my eyes on her face, lest she think I was lewd!”

“I think she wanted you to at least *glance* at it?” Denethor suggested. “Maybe briefly and admiringly?”

“No! That would be *most improper*!” Thorongil blushed horribly and writhed. “I don’t think someone like Lady Aerin would go well in Harad. Indeed, she told me she found Haradrim horrid.”

“But there would not be a noblewoman in Minas Tirith who was happy to go to Harad?” Lúthien thinned her lips. “I heard tell that Lady Nidhien, Lord Galador’s wife, was *quite* unhappy in Beyazim.”

“Very unhappy indeed,” murmured Thorongil. “Her décolleté is also *most* alarming, I should add. She’s not in the least suited for Harad. Or for Ambassador Galador, I suspect.”

“O!” said Lúthien, with interest. “Really? I *did* hear—”

“Didn’t work with me,” said Thorongil shortly. “Might have worked with Bergon? Valar knows why. Anyone can tell she’s a cobra of a woman, and a tremendous troublemaker. I’ve never asked him, but I’m sure he regrets it.”

“Well, *well*,” said Lúthien, with delight.

“O my,” said Denethor, around a mouthful of chicken. “How very awkward.”

“*Extremely*,” said Thorongil, running his fork around the plate to collect the gravy. “She was quite persistently on my case. I ended up asking Arahaelon to get her to stop, and he did.”

“Lord Arahaelon?” Lúthien raised an eyebrow. “You are *friends*?”

“Aye, he’s an exacting master, but we get along well.” Thorongil’s brow crinkled. “I asked him if Nidhien had ever made play for him. For some reason he found this *terribly* funny—?”

Denethor said faintly, “But *surely*, Gil, you’ve met his housemate Tuor?”

Thorongil grimaced. “Yes, many a time. Most waspish fellow! I would have sought a different housemate, if I were Arahaelon. I’m glad to have Duinion! He’s no fuss at all.”

“Lord Arahaelon is very professional, in his dealings with you?” said Lúthien, carefully, probingly.

Thorongil’s eyebrows flew up. “Goodness, yes! One really could not meet a more professional man than he. Soul of propriety, which is why I sought his advice with regard to Nidhien. He has excellent taste in Haradric poetry, as well.” He blinked. “Now I think of it, I can’t see why *he* doesn’t have a wife, but I suppose he also has difficulty finding a woman who likes Harad?”

Lúthien and Denethor made desperate eye contact, and Denethor bit his cheek to control his expression. Clearly Thorongil had not realised that Deputy Ambassador Arahaelon had a distinct and

well-known predilection for attractive, slender, intelligent men. Denethor could not help feeling glad that, first, Arahaelon was professional in the workplace, and secondly, that he did not have to explain any of this to Thorongil, a pretty, slender, and highly accomplished man. Denethor was not concerned that Thorongil would be seduced by Arahaelon—his brother was simply a very shy, sweet boy who was unsuited to the social machinations of Lúthien's friends' cousins and daughters. He did hope Thorongil found a woman to marry eventually, just so that their Mama would stop moaning that she was so worried for her little baby boy, but he privately doubted one of Lúthien's set-ups would succeed.

Once Thorongil had gone home, after sampling a piece of the Haradric Delight, Lúthien said to Denethor, "Is Gilly really *that* naïve, my love?"

"Yes," said Denethor, glumly. "He's the most strange mix of intelligence and cluelessness that I've ever encountered in one person. He's evidently got no idea about Arahaelon. I must say I'm relieved—it means Arahaelon hasn't made a pass."

Lúthien sighed. "Thank the Valar. It may be that Gil is too sane for him?"

Denethor stared at his wife. "*My brother? Too sane? We are talking about a man who thinks it is fun to teach our sons about Ancalagon the Black, about assassinations via toilet seats, and Haradric curses? A man who is so vague he sometimes walks into walls and puts on his coat inside out?*"

"Still—compared to some of Arahaelon's previous conquests, that is tame." Lúthien brightened. "You know, Arahaelon's apparently having an off-and-on *affaire* with Lord Ecthelion? Now there is insanity for you."

Denethor waved a hand: today's opponent before the Minas Tirith Court of Appeal, Egalmoth the Younger, was another of Ecthelion's conquests, as the senior advocates all knew, but it was not polite to mention it. "Almost every nobleman who has ever had a thought towards another man has had an *affaire* with Lord Ecthelion of Emyr Arnem. This does not surprise me at all. The only thing that surprises me is that the Steward turns a blind eye to it—"

"Well, it's not the kind of thing one would want to speak about," said Lúthien, reasonably. "The Steward may not realise?"

"There's nothing the Steward does not realise," said Denethor. "If he's ignoring it, he has his reasons. Perhaps he hopes it will run its course, and Lord Ecthelion will settle?"

"Quite possible," said Lúthien.

"Anyway, I hope Gilly finds someone," said Denethor.

"So do I, dear. Such a terrible *waste*, otherwise," said Lúthien, kissing Denethor. "Good night, my darling."