

Melda,

I was very relieved when Aiglos arrived today. Needless to mention I had grown increasingly concerned during the week of silence, and Al-Jahmir's repeated remarks about Dol Arandur made it worse. He still has no clue that we have found a way to communicate, which gives me some silent pleasure.

Now that I am finally "back in time" – I completely lost reckoning during my transport here – I was glad to read that the past days (especially the 15th) seem not to have troubled you as much as I feared they would – although I am sure you have not told me everything. I was comforted how much more cheerful your letter read. My sincere thanks to Éomer for helping you through this as well. No surprise that Elboron should be fascinated by him. Letting him sit on his horse was a sure way to win his affection. And as for inventing a few nice new names for my host, I have no doubt he came up with some very creative versions. Your language seems to be made for this kind of thing!

I am not sure yet what to think of you telling strange stories to the twins. Lest they develop a wrong idea of their father. Cheating at archery indeed! Then again I think I should be grateful, for this way they may remember me at all. I am not sure they took much notice of me during the short while I was around, and there are times when I wonder if they shall ever see me again.

My thanks to Túrin for his account of the goings on in council. I was little surprised by the reactions, and am indeed glad about people like Imrabil and Húrin – and Elessar himself –, who try and view things objectively. Regarding the Stewardship, they must consider all eventualities, and fact is Elboron has many years yet until he comes of age. In the end 'tis up to the King to decide what is to be done. Who knows, the office may even fall to you, to hold it until our son is old enough.

I must admit the murmurs about a possible replacement for me dealt me a stab. That they should consider these things so soon, before even any contact has been made with Al-Jahmir ... I know many of them would rather see me out of the way, yet the notion of apparently being so easily replaceable unsettles me. As, in a way, did your account of the events at home. Of course I am glad to know the children are happy and content, and untroubled by what is going on. I would not have it otherwise. Nevertheless, in very dark moments (like now) I cannot help feeling superfluous. I have missed so much of Elboron's growing up already, and the twins I have hardly seen at all, and perhaps never shall again. They will grow up regardless if I am there or not, and happily, too, because they have you and our friends and kin. So what difference would it make if I returned tomorrow or in a month or never – to them, I mean?

Ab, Éowyn, there are moments when I am full of hope that I will soon manage to leave this place. I tell myself that there is, that there must be a way. That I will get away eventually. But there are other, perhaps more realistic moments, too. Promises are all very well, motivating, certainly, yet right now I cannot see how I could possibly fulfill mine, and my recent dark dreams do not generate confidence. Do not think I am disheartened, not yet. But perhaps we should not set our hopes too high, for otherwise I fear the grief will only be deeper should things turn against us.

Forgive my earlier black mood – I have just returned from supper with my "host" and have reread what I wrote then. I did not want to scare you. Lately my mood seems to change as swiftly as the weather on this isle: from darkest despair to bright hope and back again. I am quite certain the poison adds to this emotional instability. But enough of this.

What befell here since my last message? On the 15th Al-Jahmîr returned, and ill-tempered, too. Apparently his meeting with the former lords of Tolfalas did not go as well as he had hoped. I know I should be glad if his designs go awry, yet at the moment I feel more inclined to keep him good-humoured. We had an enlightening conversation that day. In the early evening he suddenly had me brought to him, and to my great astonishment demanded that I should follow him outside. As we left through the main gate and for the first time I saw the building under the light of day I thought I recognised the place. If I am not entirely mistaken, 'twas once called Barad Gwaelin by its Númenorean founders, because of the many gulls and other seabirds that dwell on the cliffs 'tis built upon. Under this name it should be marked on old maps of Tolfalas. I am not sure if it is registered on more recent maps, though, as it was abandoned long ago. It seems to have been rebuilt only recently – and rebuilt in style, I should add. It would not astound me if Al-Jahmîr himself either initiated or at least supported this venture, to gain Barad Gwaelin as a hiding-place should one day he encounter trouble at home. It has its own hidden harbour, large enough to shelter a large warship, and appears to receive supplies mostly from the sea. If my reckoning is correct, it should be no more than 15 miles hence to Forlond, the capital of Tolfalas on the north-eastern tip of the isle – as the crow flies; over the hills on winding tracks 'tis longer.

But I wanted to tell you about Al-Jahmîr and our conversation. We walked along a narrow path leading down to a stony beach, me in front, with Azrahil and two other guards following, and him bringing up the rear. It was low tide. On the beach the guards stepped back, and left us more or less to ourselves (but with bows at the ready). It felt good to be out at the fresh air again, although the cold wind (and perhaps even more the company) made me shiver. For a long time no one spoke. Al-Jahmîr just stood at a little distance, watching me, then of a sudden he asked me if I knew what day it was. I was not sure, and told him so. He seemed to find this amusing, and made a teasing remark that such a historical date surely should not be forgotten. I knew then what he was driving at. I began to question him about his own dealings with the Dark Lord, and his doings during the War (for little is known about that – not even Khorazir was able to tell me), but he only answered evasively. He admitted, however, that he was partly responsible for the massive corsair-attacks on our southern fiefs, which drew so much sorely needed help from the defense of Minas Tirith. He also appears to have met the King, back when Elessar in the guise of Thorongil victoriously attacked Umbar. Needless to say he does not remember him fondly.

I was astounded how much he seemed to know about what befell me at Osgiliath, and the War in general. Several times he referred to you, in his gloating, slimy way, knowing he would stir both my anger and my longing to return, as well as my despair about my present situation. Are there any news of the traitor yet? Your account of Berúthiel's strange behaviour reads as if Lordel made her his spy.

He continued mocking me with elaborating how terrible it must be for you not to know more about my fate than a small, blood-smeared note would reveal (the wretched man learned of Narâk's message as well!). I then asked him what exactly he had in mind for me, upon which he fell silent, eyeing me thoughtfully. I inquired if it was ransom he was after, either in the form of riches or some political favour, such as reestablishing him in Umbar. The latter suggestion seemed to have struck some chord, nevertheless he only shrugged.

"For the time being," he said with that evil smile of his I have come to loathe so deeply, "I simply want to detain you here, and sit back and watch what grief and upheavals this will cause in Gondor. You repeatedly decided to annoy me, even after I had sent you obvious warnings, and you must have learned by now that I am not a man to forget even minor slights. So perhaps I shall not demand ransom at all. Perhaps it will please me more to keep you here until I get bored by your company. And once I am bored, you will die – and you should have learned by now that this is nothing to look forward to. Maybe I shall decide to let you go, after breaking your proud spirit. Or I shall set you free unharmed, but with nothing to return to. There are so many possibilities, and you, I am afraid, cannot in any way influence my decision. 'tis entirely up to my mercy."

I could not help replying, "What mercy?", upon which his smile broadened, and he shrugged.

"True, there are some who claim I possess none. Perhaps they are right. Anyway, from now on you are free to leave your chamber and roam the countryside at your leisure. Of course you will not be alone. The men will look after you. And we both know you cannot run very far even if you manage to escape them. Supper is at sundown." With that he left me.

I spent the hours until the evening meal at the beach, watching the water reclaim it as the tide rose, trying to think of a way to alter my dismal situation, but no cunning plan would present itself, perhaps because my thoughts mostly dwelled on home. On you and the boys, on our friends and kin, or what is left of that. I thought of Denethor, painfully reminded of the fact that on this very day more than a decade ago he ended his life, and I wondered what he would counsel me, or indeed what he would say if he could see me now, clad in Haradaic robes, looking pale and drawn, on a lonely beach miles and miles from home, detained there at a merciless man's mercy.

But I am working on a way to escape. I have managed to steal an empty bottle, and have begun to secretly save water-rations. Unfortunately this means not enough is left to keep me free of pain, but 'tis tolerable. I have discovered a new feature of the poison: combining it with wine is not a good idea. At dinner yesterday I drank a little (to be honest it was a welcome change from this water of doom). Only a short while afterwards I felt the familiar stabbing pain in the chest, together with a sickness in stomach. It subsided after I had drunk more water, but I am warned now. Hopefully this additional information is going to help Teherin.

Although I am allowed to roam the vicinity more freely, my search for the antidote is still difficult, since my guards are determined to keep me away from most parts of the castle. I managed to nick more paper, at least, to be able to continue our correspondance. Perhaps in the future you could add some blank sheets to your letters. It would make things easier and certainly less dangerous for me.

I shall keep Khorazîr's warning in mind concerning Azrahil. So far he has not heeded me much, although he has become my constant companion during my walks along the cliffs and on the beaches. The past three days I spent hours outside, for the weather was fair, and Al-Jahmîr seemed to have had other things to occupy himself with, meaning I only saw him during meals. The exercise has somewhat improved my condition. I feel stronger now, and the fresh, salty air seems to make the now constant ache in my chest more bearable.

Speaking of this pain, I doubt 'tis entirely caused by the poison. Much of it is my acute longing to return home, to see the children again and to take you in my arms. I miss you more than I can describe. Tomorrow is the anniversary of our first meeting as I just recalled. I do not want to believe that what began there and then should be ended so suddenly and so grievously because this pleases some pathetic little Umbarian. So please do not heed my gloomy ramblings above too much. If there is a way out of here, I shall find it. My love to everybody at home, especially the boys, and even more especially you. Write again soon!

*Love always,
Faramir*