

Dearest Éowyn,

your account of how the children are doing delighted me, despite increasing my urge to return home to an almost painful level. It has been some time since Al-Jahmír last teased me with tidings from home, so I assume the spies have not been as active as they used to. Perhaps they suspect something and act more carefully now – which may also account for the fact you have not been able to uncover them yet.

So, Meriadoc does not like to lie on the rug? Or is the problem that he has to lie on his tummy? Perhaps the floor is too cold, or else he feels too vulnerable being placed on the ground like this, with even the cat towering over him. And Peregrin has little appetite? Well, he is not taking after his father in this respect, then. 'Tis good to hear Elboron is getting used to the twins, and even enjoys looking after them. I remember that Boromir used to enjoy being the big brother as well. He would carry me around on his back, and I pretended he was my pony. Of course our boys are not that far apart in age, but I can see them play together in the gardens, or tease the servants (and of course their parents). And if Vorondil is going to be anything like his father when Túrin was a child, things are going to get really exciting when the four are out and about together.

You are right, the discussions about my fate are going to be highly interesting, and I wish I was there to overhear the lords. Is Falastur coming as well? I cannot imagine him staying away. I wonder what course he is going to choose. He is one of the councilmen whose reaction I cannot foresee. Everybody knows he would not mind if I did not return, and he will definitely vote against Gondor taking up negotiations with criminals like Al-Jahmír and his outlawed friends. Also, the Umbarian escaped from his prison, which, I am sure, was no doing of Falastur's because he obviously hates Al-Jahmír, and would rather see him destroyed than even me. So will he vote for a swift, hard stroke against the Umbarian? In fact, this seems the most probable course, and the suggestion most nobles are going to make: find out where he is hiding and try and finish him. If the Steward survives, good, if not, bad luck, but at least Al-Jahmír is out of the way then.

But of course this solution is not in your (and least of all my) interest, and Elessar, Imrahil and others will also try and find ways to make sure I survive this, while still catching or killing Al-Jahmír. I do not think we need to fear his allies too much. Although he seemed pleased by their decision to support him, from what I have learned I do not judge their resources great enough to do much harm. My suspicion is Al-Jahmír only wanted them on board to have more people around to share the blame should his designs go awry. Perhaps he even plans to deliver them to Gondor to reduce his own sentence. Every one of them is worth a considerable sum. The corsair Kathuphazgân boasted only yesterday that there was a price of 1000 gold pieces on his head in Pelargir.

You wondered about Azrahil, and his motives for taking part in this venture. I have been wondering about him constantly, indeed ever since I arrived here, and learned of his relationship with Al-Jahmír. Now, two days ago I had a very interesting conversation with him, which shed some light on some of the many questions surrounding him.

I told you how he reacted to the arrival of the guests, and how he even insulted Carandil openly. Al-Jahmír saw to it that he was kept away from his friends from then on, which Azrahil did not seem to mind at all. The following day we went for our usual walk along the cliffs. The weather was fair and warm, despite a strong wind from the west, and both of us were glad to be away from the others. I was somewhat irritated, though, that this time no other guards accompanied us. Usually there were two or three bowmen nearby. Also, we did not follow the usual route, but went farther, to where the coast forms a little headland that reaches out into the sea, its highest point crowned by a heap of ancient stones. While we walked, no word was spoken, although his face plainly betrayed the fact that something was occupying him. Now and again he would kick away a stone as if angered by something, or he would cast a dark glance over his shoulder to where the fortress of Barad Gwaelin loomed in the distance.

When we had reached the stones, remains of an ancient building, perhaps, now grown over by sweet-smelling yellow gorse and other hardy bushes, he climbed on top of the heap and let his gaze wander around. Very dimly a faint blue line could be descried in the north: the coast of Lebennin. He must have noticed how I was watching this far coast with longing in my eyes, for he jumped down again, and said: "It seems so close, does it not? Yet for everybody confined to this cursed island it is farther away than the moon."

I was surprised to hear him speak to me thus. So far he had barely addressed me at all. I gave him a searching glance, which he did not seem to like. "So I am not the only prisoner here, am I?" I said, testing if he was really interested in a conversation as his odd behaviour seemed to indicate.

He snorted, picked up a small pebble from the stoneheap and cast it far out into the sea. "If I had a choice, I would not have gotten involved in this crazy venture at all," he said, and the next moment appeared astounded by his own openness.

I watched him carefully. "So why do you stay?"

He hesitated, picked up another stone, but instead of throwing it he weighed it in his hand. "Family obligations," he replied curtly, without looking at me.

"Because he is your uncle?"

"Half-uncle. Aye. He has helped me in the past, and so I owe him."

"And he is fully aware of this and now abuses your situation for his own shady purposes, right?"

He turned to me, his eyes narrowing. My guess had obviously unsettled him. "My father was his half-brother, born a bastard by one of their father's many women. And I was not exactly born out of wedlock either, so where do you think this places me in a society where it means everything who one is descended from?"

He had spoken fiercely, with a glint in his dark eyes, and I, surprised by his openness, nodded gravely. "I see. Since your descent yields no honour, you must make yourself a name. And your tasks here, and indeed your present situation leave you little chance for honourable deeds."

He cast the stone, which was swallowed up by a large wave breaking on a rock out in the sea. "Marek is a worm," he spat, and it sounded like a curse. "He has bold plans which I could even support where not his means so utterly disgusting. I have no love for you tarks. If it was up to me, there would be no peace between us, and we would still raid your rich coasts freely, and waylay your merchants. So the idea of abducting one of your lords, and exchanging him for certain favours is not a bad one. But the way Marek pursues his plans is devoid of all honour. He commanded me to catch you. If things had been up to me, I would have waylaid you, yes, but so that you would have seen your attackers, that you would have had a chance of defending yourselves. For this is honourable. Open combat, instead of skulking in the underbrush like some damned Elves. I would not have used a cursed poison to weaken you, to then only have to pick you up once it had knocked you out. Also, to keep you here, locks and guards should have sufficed. Had you found a way to escape, I would have realised that you had outwitted me, and would have accepted my defeat. But this is not how Marek thinks. He wants to win at all costs. This poison he uses on you is the most honourless thing I have ever encountered. You know who originally devised it in the lands I come from? Rich women, to make sure their husbands did not stray from home and betray them. Marek learned of it, and had it modified so that it is even more painful, more evil. Every week you pass here with the venom in your veins costs you one year of your life, if not more. It slowly takes you apart. Do you taste blood in your mouth when you wake up? Not yet? Soon you will. Then you will lose your appetite, and your eyesight, and slowly your body will deteriorate, as if old age had caught up with you already. Sure, there is an antidote, but you do not seriously believe he would ever give it to you. You will die on this cursed rock, and so, I deem, will I."

For a moment I remained silent after his speech. Needless to say his account had shocked me. So far I have not experienced any of the long-term effects of the poison, but I do not doubt his description of what it will ultimately do to me is true. Hopefully Teherin will soon find out how to fight it.

Realising that he was watching me keenly, apparently to see what effect his words had on me, I met his gaze. "Why do you tell me all this? To further torment me? Or have you other things in mind?"

"What do you mean?"

"Since you are unhappy about the way things are developing here, and your own place therein, perhaps together we could find a solution for the problem."

He laughed grimly. "Are you suggesting that I aid your escape, and thus betray my uncle?"

"Your half-uncle. Did you yourself not call him an honourless worm only a moment ago?"

"Yes, but you watch your tongue, bloody tark! I may insult him, but I will not suffer you do so as well. He is still family, and ties of blood are stronger than any other. I swore allegiance to him, and I am not going to break my word."

"Even if this is going to be your downfall?"

"Even then. And what could you offer me, anyway? What power do you have here? Aye, you write messages home –"

I drew a sharp breath in shock and surprise, and he smiled thinly. "You thought you were so very clever, and managed to hide your secret activities from me, did you not? You would be surprised about how much I know of you. I know you stole paper, and I know of your feathered friend who visits you regularly. Also, I have a strong suspicion concerning Marek's poisoned wine that got the cook into so much trouble."

"If you know all this, why have you not told your uncle?"

"I have told him not yet, you mean. At the moment I see little harm in what you do. He definitely deserved the discomfort the wine caused him. And if he is not careful and keeps a better watch on you while you are in your room, this is not my problem. I told you I despise the way he treats you. If it was up to me, to get you out of the way – which is his ultimate desire – I would have attacked you openly, and slain you in an honourable fight. Like Khorazir attempted, only he turned soft in the end and did not finish you. Nevertheless he has made his name."

"Who knows, perhaps we could find a way for you to win honour as well," I suggested, still somewhat under shock from what I had just learned.

His hand gripped the hilt of his scimitar, he whipped out the blade and pointed it at my face, his eyes glinting again. "I should kill you here and now for suggesting I should betray my kin," he said fiercely.

"Are you not betraying him already, by withholding important information from him?" I returned.

He hesitated for a moment, then lowered the sword. "It all depends on the definition of 'betrayal'," he at length said, and I thought I detected a faint smile in his eyes.

"I see," I said slowly. "But tell me, since you have me in your hands now, there must be something you want of me."

"For the moment," he replied, sheathing his scimitar again, "I only want you to be more careful in your activities. Marek still thinks you are absolutely powerless. It is not my fault if he underestimates you by not considering the eventuality that you have found a way to plot your escape behind his back. But since at the moment you do not seem to have gotten very far with this, I see no reason to interfere. And if your people do not send a favourable reply to his message, you are going to be dead in a short while anyway."

"So are you, for my people are going to avenge me. And since you would be put into the same box with your uncle and people like Carandil and Barahir, 'tis a sure way to make your name sink even lower in people's eyes."

"Unless I find a way to redeem myself."

"Unless we find a way to redeem you, yes. You cannot get out of this honourably without my help, and you know it."

"And you cannot survive this without mine." He cast a glance at the sun. "Since this is settled, we better return. You have an appointment for dinner with the 'lords'."

Dinner with the lords was as unenjoyable as the evening before. Carandil delighted in gloating on me, and I suffered it, my mind still dwelling on the conversation with Azrahil. I am not sure if I can really consider him an ally. Al-Jahmir must know of the other's resentments against him, which makes me wonder why he still trusts him. But I am quite certain Azrahil spoke his true mind to me and told no lies, for this is not like him. He is very different from his half-uncle in this respect.

Well, I can only wait and see how things develop. It all seems to depend on your reply now, or rather on how Al-Jahmir receives it, and how well it suits his plans. I have not spoken to Azrahil since our conversation. He seems determined to keep away from me. But because I was able to receive Aiglos without problems, and you got my message alright, it seems that for the time being he is indeed willing not to heed my activities.

I am anxious as to what results the discussions with King and council will yield. As I said before, I have full trust in you. For now fare you well, my love. Do not worry too much about what Azrahil said about the poison. So far I have been feeling well. Indeed I believe I am in better shape now than when I set out due to enough sleep, regular exercise and good food. And as for losing a few years of my life, well, there must be some advantage to having a share of Númenorean blood. I have always had a good constitution, and it would not surprise me if I could endure this longer than my captors believe. In a way your letters help me as well, for they strengthen my will to see this through, and to return to you.

Please make sure Elboron gets to see the frogs. Yet another thing he can tell me about when I return. And do have a word with Peregrin about the food. Tell him his father is a little disappointed that he shows so little interest in it. Surely Meriadoc will soon appreciate the rug. I remember how Elboron loved to crawl there when he was a little older than the twins are now, and we had to be careful he did not pull out any threads and eat them. And when you have a moment for yourself, go down to the walnut grove. The lady's smock should be in flower there soon, as it was last year when we practised archery, and you cheated again as usual. Then think of me, as I shall think of you. I cannot wait to be cheated by you again!

*Love,
Faramir*