

*Melda,*

*First of all let me assure you that I am alive and well, to ease your anxiety – although I must admit your letter has quite increased mine. I know how you loathe being confined to bed, yet I can only echo our friends' advice to listen to Teherin. She would not be so strict with you without good reason. Needless to say I am increasingly worried about you. I know you are strong, but even this strength has limits, and you must not forget to look after yourself, to rest, and, as difficult as this may sound, to carry on with life, and to try and enjoy each new day. For live you must, and shall. You have conquered the shadow once and shall again. You have light and laughter and our babies' smiles all around you. I am glad you have the children to cheer you up and distract you. They must be a great solace to you, and this thought comforts me as well. I do not want to imagine you wasting away due to grief and despair, pining about things you cannot alter or influence. As I have said before, whatever happens to me here is beyond your control, and, more importantly, responsibility.*

*As for Al-Jahmir's reaction to your letter, the fact I am still alive shows it did not cause him to do anything rash and cruel, nevertheless he was all but pleased by your reply, despite receiving quite the answer he must have expected. As I have told you before, your reply could have said the exact opposite, and still his reaction would have been little different, I deem. For the way things have developed, there is only one wise course for him to take, which is to set me free, and try and flee. And he knows this, and loathes the idea, for it would mean to admit defeat. If he was a man of honour and daring, he might try and win glory with a bold stroke against Gondor that would result in his death, but he is not such a man. He will cling to life and the shreds of his former power as long as he can, and thus he is unlikely to waste about the only assurance for his survival he has at the moment.*

*The past days have been very eventful. As expected, your reply worked some changes here, and while it released the unbearable tension that had been building up till the messenger's arrival, new tension has arisen since, which may escalate any moment – and even to my advantage. But let me begin my account where the last letter ended.*

*Two days after the feast I was indeed allowed out again. In fact I had to accompany the others while they set out to hunt with the new falcons. Most of the acrobats, dancers and musicians had left again. It seems they were returned to Umbar, or wherever Rabazûl found them. Who was present, however, were a number of guards in the old livery of the courts of Tolfalas and even Lebennin. It seems our exiled lords have managed, like Al-Jahmir, to persuade some of their former household men to rejoin them. The Umbarian was displeased about this development, although he tried not to show it, as was Azrahil. He is in charge of most of Al-Jahmir's guards, and obviously fears outbreaks of rivalry or even the rekindling of old feuds between the different companies. After all, especially Carandil's men are "tarks", and their haughty, condescending attitude does not go down well with the proud Umbarians.*

*Anyway, during the hunt, while the lords delighted in falconry, during some moments in which I was unwatched I managed to search for the myrtle bushes. I found a plant that looks very similar, but noticed it does not have the distinctive smell. It must be a different herb. Throughout the hunt Azrahil hovered close to me, as if waiting for an opportunity to address me. His uncle had entrusted the small lion to him, apparently not knowing what to do with the creature, and certainly less interested in it than in the falcons. Azrahil seemed equally irritated by what is nothing more than a large kitten at the moment, and does not look dangerous at all. Elboron would adore it. It constantly tried to play with the leash he had put around its neck to keep it from straying. I could tell how he was yearning to join the hunters, or at least get a closer look at the falcons, but apparently his status does not allow him to mix with the nobles. I must admit I pitied him in that moment, realising that his situation must be far worse than what he had confessed to me.*

*When I stooped to stroke the lion and let it play with the sleeve of my tunic, suddenly he said softly. "They look like the best of friends, yet one would sell the other for a trinket. So why this alliance?"*

*I did not turn or even look up. "Because each thinks he can outwit the others."*

*He remained silent for a moment, only tugged slightly at the leash when the lion bit into my sleeve. "So not much would be needed to cause dissention, would it?"*

*"A little hint here and there, some misinformation spread in the right ears ... and they will be at each others' throats. But your half-uncle surely suspects their planned deceit."*

*"So he does. He lacks proof, though."*

*"You could supply him with such, and so get rid of them."*

*"How?"*

*I laughed grimly. "If I aid you, what do I gain? The more your uncle is distracted by their antics, the less he heeds me. And if they overthrow him, I shall rejoice."*

*"Nay, you shall not. For he is the only one who knows how to mix the antidote. You need him to win."*

*In that moment Al-Jahmîr became aware of us, and called Azrahil to him, while giving me a long, searching glance. I am sure he is aware of it, but the young man is playing a very dangerous game, for Marek is very attentive, paranoid, even, when it concerns his own safety, and likely to notice deceit in any form. If he realised we had been talking with each other, he did not show it, though.*

*In the days following tension rose hourly. Small quarrels broke out between the different companies of guards. Barahir and Kathuphazgân had a fierce discussion which ended with the drawing of swords, and which may have been caused by a certain rumour concerning Barahir's plans for filling his depleted treasury again by winning a certain bounty of 1000 gold pieces. That evening was the first time I saw Al-Jahmîr lose his temper, and I was glad I was not the one who had earned his rage (well, at least not according to his knowledge). He threatened to cast out the corsair, the nobles and all their retinue. Then Carandil tried to threaten him in his turn, reminding him that by now their fates were linked, and if one fell, the others would inevitably follow. Barahir made very clear that in fact the Umbarian was the guest in his realm, and that Barad Gwaelin of old belonged to his family. I am sure the situation would have escalated and resulted in blood-shed, had not the errand-rider arrived with your reply.*

*This long and eagerly awaited message caused them to forgo their internal fights for the time being, and returned their discussions, heated though they were, to a level were it was not to be feared that murder might be committed any moment. As I have mentioned already, the content of the message held little surprise for Al-Jahmîr, although it seems the Gondorians had expected the King to be more willing to enter into negotiations. Ciryaher revealed a surprising hoard of harsh insults for you which I will not repeat here, and none of them took your threats seriously. Carandil even appeared humoured by them, mocking Al-Jahmîr that he had to be careful now so as not to end up defeated by a mere woman. To my surprise, the Umbarian reacted less fiercely than I had thought, merely reminding Carandil of the disastrous outcome of his own marriage, which is always a sure way to shut the Lord of Lebennin's big mouth. Needless to say hearing them talk about you the way they did and calling you all sorts of vile names made me increasingly angry – which of course was what they intended.*

*Before I could retort, however, Carandil raised the question which had occurred to me already when they had read the reply to me: how to proceed now, and what to do with me? How to prove I was still alive? And what to expect from negotiations anyway, since it was obvious nothing was to be gotten from King and Council. Al-*

*Jahmîr sat by and let them make suggestions, watching me. At one time I returned his gaze, and was troubled by the cold calculation in his look. I knew he had already conceived his own plan, and would pursue it regardless of the others' intentions.*

*Today, much to my surprise, while the others were out hunting again, he demanded that I join him once more on a walk on the beach. I complied, with an uneasy feeling. Again Azrahil and some bowmen accompanied us.*

*"Your wife's reply is cautious," he opened the conversation, "and her words well-chosen. Yet it was unwise of her to try and threaten me. She is the one who should be careful. But then of course she does not know that her own life and those of her beloved children are in danger, does she? I can have her killed far swifter than she could possibly harm me. What a pity it is she is unaware of her danger, is it not? If only you could warn her. The fear for her life must be almost unbearable." I replied naught, silently praising Aiglos and Lordel once more.*

*"So," he went on, his eyes glittering with fell amusement, "your king – your friend – and fellow councilmen desert you. Not that I seriously expected them to act otherwise. But that opens the question of what your wife could possibly offer me, now that political favours are out of question. I know for a fact that she has no great riches at her disposal, since the rebuilding of your princedom has eaten up much of that, especially this unfortunate fire not long ago. So what else is there? I assume she is still a beautiful woman, despite having born several children. You will consider the archers, will you not?" he added with a thin smile, noticing my gaze. "So, in fact I see little she can indeed offer me to buy your life," he said. "Which of course is unfortunate for you."*

*"And for you," I replied. "For if you kill me, she will avenge me. You have already earned her hatred by holding me prisoner, and when she learns of the poison, I assure you she will hunt you down, and find you in whatever hole you creep to hide from her wrath. I know what you decadent Umbarians think of women, and where you rank them in your society. But you, Marek, should have realised their true strength and power by now. Need I mention Naeramarth, who thwarted you and your half-brother in your very castle, stealing your most precious prisoner under your nose? And have you not heard who felled the most dangerous enemy in the battle against the Dark Lord, the Lord of the Nazgûl himself? Do not underestimate her! Or rather do, why indeed should I warn you? Increase her hatred by slaying me, and then watch how she destroys you utterly. And imagine how a defeat like this will be regarded in Umbar: proud Marek Al-Jahmîr, reduced to a squirming, powerless worm by a woman! You do not want to live and endure such shame, do you, Marek?"*

*"It seems to me you would like to spend the night without water," he spat, glowering at me, my words having obviously unsettled him.*

*But I was motivated now, even at the prospect of a rough night. "Why do you not admit it to yourself? Your cause is lost. There is no way for you out of this. You have squandered what profit you could have gained a long time ago. In all your wisdom, you were too slow to conform to new times. Ever since Mordor's fall and the return of the King, you have tried to trouble and destabilise Gondor, instead of doing what every wise ruler in the South and East has done: they embraced the peace, allied themselves with us while still retaining their independence, and set up trade connections. 'tis said 'where the sword goes, trade follows', and they understood, and now they prosper, and Gondor prospers because of their contributions. Umbar, ever wayward, needed a little more persuasion, but after Elessar's second victorious campaign there even the Umbarians submitted to Gondorian sway, and for the first time in many centuries Umbar was at peace, and indeed profits from it. Or would have been at peace but for people like you who stirred up old hatred for their own shady purposes. And you were not content with upsetting the peace in Umbar, were you? You, in your impudence, had to strike at Gondor as well. I must grant you, there were times when your plan almost succeeded. In the year ere Elboron was born you almost achieved your desire. But in the end you failed utterly, and now you are grasping at straws. So yes, go on, kill me. My death will cause grief and some irritation in Gondor, but nothing more. My position, my office can be filled by others, and so it shall. It will neither endanger the kingship nor the political structure of the realm, not anymore. And it will not cause another war – for this is what you really want, is it not? You want – you need, to rise to power again –, a new war, something that shatters the order that has been established recently. You*

want to sweep the chessboard clean, and then set up the pieces again, in the hope they end up in a more favourable position for you. But have you not noticed you are not one of the players anymore? You are out of the game, Marek, and deep down you know it. Only in your foolish pride you cannot admit it to yourself."

"You are aware you have just pronounced your own death-sentence?" he said with deadly quiet, and seemed startled when I laughed.

"Come on, Al-Jahmír, my survival was never part of your plan! I was already dead when I set out on the journey that was then interrupted by your men. Most likely there is no antidote to the poison, or else you have used it all on yourself."

"I knew it was your doing!" he growled. "And you will pay for it!"

"How? More pain? I can take that. Moreover, killing me, as I have pointed out to you before, is not going to solve your problem. For as soon as news of my death reach Gondor, you shall have not a moment of peace anymore. Nor any of the luxuries you relish. You will be a hunted man, a common outlaw, even more so than during the past months. And eventually they will catch you. And then, Marek, they shall finish you. Not by taking your life. There are worse things than that, which you know well. But there is one way to avoid this, one tiny chance for you to escape this doom. Let me go, after taking this curse off me, and run!"

Now he laughed. "You do not seriously believe I shall let you go, do you? And your wife will not harm me, for she is going to die before you."

"If you refuse this opportunity, you are more stupid than I thought. And if you kill Éowyn, you have not only Gondor against you, but Rohan as well. And you do not want the Rohirrim as your enemies, for they are a fell people, and their revenge would be terrible."

Our debate was suddenly interrupted by a guard. Something must have befallen at the hunt. Immediately Al-Jahmír had me returned to my chamber, while he followed the guard, and I have not seen any of them since. Thus I do not know what happened there to cause the guard's agitation. I can only repeat my warning to you to be extra careful. I do not like his words concerning you and the children. But perhaps this is your opportunity to finally catch the spy. Please, please keep me updated of how things develop at home. And do take care of yourself. As long as you are alive and well, 'tis unlikely he is going to kill me, for he wants to torture me with the pain of losing you. And do not worry too much about me. This afternoon he spoke in rage. Once he has cooled down a little and begins to think again, he will see that the way I described for him is indeed the only one for him to take, if he is interested in keeping at least some of his honour and already much reduced power intact.

And do not fear I shall be in pain tonight. In my room I found a bottle of water. I cannot be sure, but I suspect it was put there by Azrahil who must have overheard much of our conversation. I wonder how it has influenced his own plans, but hopefully I shall learn more of that soon. For now I will close. I am running out of paper. Please send some more blank sheets with your next letter.

Tell the children their father is doing all he can to return to them soon, and again give my thanks to all our friends who are helping us to see this through. As for you, do not lose hope, and do grant yourself some rest. If you see or hear something that delights you, do not believe you ought to have a bad conscience while enjoying it, only because times are difficult. This is something my stay here has taught me: that every day, and especially every moment of joy and beauty is precious and must not be squandered. So please try and relish as many of those precious moments as possible. I do not want to return to find you all pale and sad, a mere shadow of yourself. I want to find my Éowyn in all her splendour and glory. So see to it she does not disappear!

Love always,  
Faramir