

Melda,

my apologies for not writing earlier. I know this caused you to worry. I do not even have the excuse of having been busy all day. Fact is I have been under close surveillance lately, and moreover I had run out of paper, and only today managed to steal this roll of parchment. On the back there is a list of wages for the people working here. I thought might be good to send, for now you have their number, their names and their professions. 'Tis written in some obscure Haradaic dialect, and I understand only half of it. Túrin may be able to translate it fully, though.

Now as to what befell here, there have been some major upheavals. Where shall I begin? I think I ended my last letter with an account of my conversation with Azrahil. This chanced on the 17th, and the next day, shortly after I had finished my letter to you and had just gone to bed, suddenly the door to my room burst open. Al-Jahmir was there, with a number of guards. Although he pretended to be calm and controlled, I could tell he was boiling with rage underneath. There was no sign of Azrahil or of the healer and her apprentices (despite the latter having been accommodated close to my room), which told me that something had gone very wrong.

I was commanded to dress, then the guards took me in their midst and escorted me to the room I had so often dined with Al-Jahmir or played chess. Not very gently I was pushed into a chair, while the Umbarian drew himself up before me, glowering at me. For some time he did not speak, just watched me with smouldering eyes, then suddenly he smiled evilly.

"I must admit you almost got me there, Lord Faramir," he said almost amusedly, but with a faint but deadly edge to his voice. "Perhaps because I underestimated your ability to influence people. I should have known you would try and turn my own men against me. But luckily they are not as utterly faithless as I feared at first. Despite their treachery they are yet of use to me, as you shall see."

For a brief moment I feared that Azrahil might have betrayed me, but this thought vanished as soon as it had come, and was replaced by fear for the young man, for it seemed certain that the conversation with his uncle he had intended had turned against him. But what else Al-Jahmir was talking about I did not understand, as my questioning glance indicated. His smile broadened.

"You wonder who I am referring to, are you not? Why, your little friend, of course, who foolishly decided first to challenge then to insult me. Needless to say he is going to pay for it, and more dearly than he can imagine. The same goes for those who aided him, the cursed healer and her pack. And as for you, Prince of Ithilien, I know I must not kill you, nor damage you too much. But that does not mean I cannot hurt you and cause you pain. And you see, for a long while I have been worrying about how to confine you here without the help of the poison which unfortunately I cannot use on you again without killing you. I had devised several ways of keeping you from running away, but none was satisfactory, or would have caused too much damage to you, my precious hostage. Then up comes Master Azrahil, all fury and indignation, and provides me with exactly the means I need to achieve what locks, chains, guards or broken legs would not do – to keep you here. What a good boy he is, do you not agree? Ah, but of course you have no idea what I am talking about, have you? So let me explain. Do you believe I have not surveyed what befell between you? How slowly the boy's weak mind was swayed by your cunning talk and your promises of honour and freedom? How bit by bit, day by day his allegiance to me, his kin, was weakened and replaced by his admiration for you? Of course he was careful not to reveal it to me, but not careful enough. And why do you think I let him continue visiting you when I knew what ultimately was going to happen, that he was only biding his time to make his treason complete? Because I realised that he would be even more useful to me as your ally instead of mine, especially if I let him render a great service to you – such as saving your life – which would cause you to end up in his debt. For, you see, suddenly it is not you I must put in chains or lock in, but him. The past weeks have shown you can endure a lot of pain and hardship. But how about

*enduring another man's suffering? A man, moreover, to whom you are indebted. Who selflessly saved your life, risking his own."*

*Now I understood, and for a moment I was speechless in the face of so much evil. He watched me gloatingly, stepping closer. "You are known to be a pitiful man, Lord Faramir. So could you really leave this poor boy to torment and death, especially when you owe him your life?"*

*I wanted to hit him in that moment, but of course the guards were prepared. "What do you want of me? How could I possibly save him?" I spat.*

*"What I want of you? Your word that you will not try to escape. In exchange I will promise you not to slay him, even though as a traitor he deserves death."*

*"Your word, Al-Jahmir?" I returned fiercely. "And what is that worth, if I may ask? Naught! You are a treacherous worm. Why should I believe for one instant that you are going to keep your word? And under these circumstances, why should I keep mine?"*

*He only smiled. "Because you are a man of honour," he replied calmly. "And, very simply, because you have no choice. If you attempt to flee, indeed if you do anything which displeases me, he will die. I have still got some of the poison, you know. You would not want him to experience what you have, would you? After all, unlike me, you are civilised, and merciful. You do not commit people to torture, especially not those you are indebted to. Have a good night."*

*He signed to his guards to fetch me. "Why should I believe a word you say?" I said. "I have seen no proof that indeed you have him at your mercy?"*

*"My mercy?" he asked viciously. "Your mercy, rather. Well, I had hoped to spare you the sight, but if you insist, I will yield. Follow me."*

*We left the chamber, and through a maze of corridors and winding staircases descended to a part of the fortress I had not seen before. Like the rest of the castle, the prison-cells were ancient, but had been rebuilt and newly secured only recently. I can really count myself fortunate being accommodated in this light and airy room with the dolphin frescoes, instead of languishing in one of the dark, damp cells deep down in the rock.*

*Poor Azrabil was not that lucky, and the sight of him being chained to the wall in one of those holes dealt me a stab of pity. Even in the dim, flickering light of the torches I could see how roughly they had treated him. He had been flogged, and his nose looked like it had been broken. Nevertheless, when Al-Jahmir entered the cell he raised his head and gave him a glance of pure hatred, which told me his spirit had not been broken, and despite his pains he was very much alive. Then he beheld me, and for a moment his proud bearing faltered. Despite feeling quite the contrary, I gave him an encouraging glance which he seemed to appreciate. Al-Jahmir went on taunting him in much the same way as he had done with me, but despite his condition, Azrabil endured his malice admirably. Only now and again I had to give him a warning glance when he looked like wanting to insult his uncle, but apart from this he hardly reacted to anything the other flung at him.*

*Only when we were about to leave again, suddenly he addressed me. "Pharzi, who looks after her now?"*

*I shrugged and shook my head. Al-Jahmir glanced from him to me, then he laughed. "Is this the bloody lion you are worried about? You are even more sentimental than I thought. I shall personally see to it the creature is being dealt with."*

*Azrabil cursed, but before Al-Jahmir could react to the insult he had uttered, I said, "The lion was a gift to you, was it not? Would it not displease the sender if he learned you slew it? And if I remember correctly, the sender*

*was your friend Kathuphazghân. Surely his brother would be ... dismayed to learn the precious gift is not appreciated. He might even be insulted, and then gone is your ship."*

*Al-Jahmîr stared at me, his eyes glowing dangerously. "Curse you, bloody tark," he hissed. "You will pay for this."*

*"Ah, but do remember not to kill me, nor to ... – how did you put it – damage me too badly," I returned. "Nor him, or else I shall escape." As I cast a brief glance to Azrahil, I saw he was smiling faintly.*

*His uncle looked like he wanted to strike me, but thought the better of it, and with an obvious effort pulled himself together. "Return him to his room," he snarled at the guards surrounding me. "I want him guarded day and night. Whoever fails me, shall join the traitor here. And fetch the damned lion."*

*So it was done. For several days I had hardly a moment to myself. Apparently Al-Jahmîr feared I would try and free Azrahil. The first day I spent completely in my room. The guards were under strict orders not even to talk to me, so I did not manage to find out what had happened to Zinizigûr and her apprentices, and how the young man was faring. On the second day, the 20th, to my great surprise I was allowed to leave the fortress, accompanied by a small host of guards, and by Pharzi, who had been officially committed to my care after (if I overheard the guards' talk correctly) biting Al-Jahmîr's hand so it had to be treated. I do not quite understand why he gave her to me. Perhaps he hoped she would bite me as well.*

*What I also overheard was a conversation about the healer. Apparently she had been assailed by Al-Jahmîr's men when she and her apprentices were out on the cliffs gathering herbs. One of the women had been slain, but somehow – the guards did not like to go into detail, out of awe or fear, perhaps – the healer had managed to escape. By using fell magic, the men whispered. Fact is she was not murdered as planned, and Al-Jahmîr was only shown the body of the apprentice who had been killed, and he was told the two others had fallen down the cliff into the sea and so perished.*

*The days following passed in a similar way. I spent much time outside (which as before greatly improved my physical condition – I was even permitted to swim in the sea), always with many guards about, and Pharzi on a leash leaping around and chasing lizards, beetles and seabirds – indeed anything that moved –, or sleeping on the sun-warm rocks. The weather was fair and warm, but with a steady breeze from the sea, and the days would have been enjoyable indeed but for the thought of Azrahil languishing in his dark cell, and my inability to do anything for him. For of course Al-Jahmîr had judged me rightly in this. In the evenings again I was forced to dine with the Umbarian, and he delighted in gloating on me. I retaliated by winning at chess every time we played.*

*Things changed suddenly when, on the 25th, your letter came. For as I have mentioned, I was watched day and night. All that time I had been anxious, not knowing what to do when Aiglos arrived, for this time his arrival would surely be noticed by others. It was my luck I was standing at the window gazing out on the starlit sea when finally he approached. I should add that outside the window, in a crevice in the wall, I had hidden the dagger Al-Jahmîr had given me to slay myself with – I had told him I had thrown it out of the window so as not to get tempted to use it on myself, and strangely he had believed this. Now, when Aiglos was drawing nigh to the window to then land on my bed as is his custom, I knew that inevitably the guards would take note. Thus swiftly I withdrew the dagger, and the moment the bird soared into the room and both men were distracted, I attacked them, and slew both ere they could utter a cry. So it was that the guards outside the door did not realise what had befallen. Swiftly I freed Aiglos of the message and sent him away again, then I stripped the taller of the guards of his armour and garments and put them on. I laid him onto the bed (realising how much of my strength was still lacking, as at first I could barely move in the heavy fishmail armour, still less lift the man), the other I put back on the chair he had sat on ere the buzzard came. Then I collected Horsey and hid it under my garments, and Pharzi who had woken from the sounds, and knocked on the door for the guards outside to open. I should add that the guards' livery also includes a light helmet with a slender nose-guard in the form of a serpent, a neck-guard of chainmail, and a long strip of cloth wound about the helm that can be used to cover one's face. I*

*did not completely conceal mine, as this would have aroused the guards' suspicion, only so much that in the torch-light out on the corridor my face would not be instantly recognisable.*

*When the door was opened and the men outside demanded what I wanted, I held up the lion which was struggling to be put on the floor again, and told them it was making such a racket that I was going to put it somewhere else for the night. Perhaps because Pharzi was indeed complaining loudly, they did not notice that my voice sounded different. The door-warden cast a brief glance into the room, saw that the tark was asleep and his companion keeping watch with his back half-turned to him, and let me pass.*

*What now? I knew I would not manage to leave the fortress as I had done shortly after my arrival here, because the passages were far better watched now. And of the secret passages out of the castle I knew none. Moreover, in my still weakened state, it was unlikely I would be able to flee far anyway. So there was only one thing to attempt. To my astonishment, the way leading down to the dungeons was hardly guarded, and also barely lit. Those guards I met I showed the lion, and told them Al-Jahmir had commanded me to put it in one of the cells, because it was becoming wild, and a real nuisance. Pharzi helped a lot by scratching one of the guards and biting another who tried to touch her, and thus we were allowed to pass. I still cannot understand why no one recognised me, or at least grew suspicious. But the entire venture was under a lucky star, otherwise it would never have worked.*

*When we reached the corridor Azrabih's cell was on, I knew another strategy was needed, and that fight was inevitable. Four guards were there, one carrying the key to the cells. Waiting behind a corner, I heard they were playing dice, having only one prisoner to watch who was locked away, and moreover chained to the wall. I was weary already due to the heavy armour, and knew my only chance was to take them completely by surprise, for else I would be an easy match for them. Thus I set the lion down and chased her towards the guards. Pharzi's sudden appearance had the desired effect. The men were did not know what to make of her, and ere they could marvel, one was dead, the other stunned with a blow to his temple (all four had taken off their helmets because of the hot, stuffy air in the corridor). The third attacked me, the wild flailing of his scimitar hindering his companion to get at me as well. I wounded him with my sword, and he stumbled over Pharzi. The fourth got through my guard, but luckily the mail turned much of his blow. Still, a long cut on my left side remained. I managed to kill him as well, though, as he was still too surprised to fight properly. Then I stunned the last, swiftly fetched the keys and unlocked Azrabih's cell. I heard him gasp when I rushed in. Obviously he feared I was come to fetch him for more torment.*

*"Tis me, Faramir," I whispered to him ere he was able to say anything, and set to freeing him from the chains and helping him to his feet. Luckily he was not as weak as I had feared. "No time for explanations. You will put on this armour. 'Tis too heavy for me to wear any longer anyway. Then try and get out of here. I am sure you know more ways than I. I will cover your escape as best I can. Make your way to Ithilien. My wife will look after you. You know Al-Jahmir better than anybody, so perhaps you can help them free me." I gave him Horsey. "Take this as a token that I sent you."*

*He glanced at me, still too overwhelmed to speak. I had already taken off most of the armour. "Hurry, I am sure more guards are going to arrive any moment." As he put on the armour, I stepped to the door. The luck still held, as there was no sign of other guards on the corridor, and no sound of their approach. I went to the four men and picked up a scimitar for myself. Then Azrabih was ready. I heard him gasp again when he spotted the lion, then laugh softly. "I know a way out," he said, rushing past me with a fierce light in his eyes, and more swiftly I would have thought possible in his state. The lion followed, and so did I.*

*On the staircase two guards turned up suddenly, but Azrabih took care of them before I even reached them. I was deadly tired by then, and moreover the wound I had not heeded at first was troubling me more and more with each step. At the top of the staircase where it opened onto another corridor, Azrabih waited for me. "The corridor leads to the kitchens which are almost deserted at this time – it is night, is it not?" he asked. I nodded, fighting for breath. "There is a way out through there, but ...," he looked at me critically. "You would not make it. I am*

*not sure I will."*

*"You have to," I panted. "As I said, I will try and hold off pursuit as long as I can. Your uncle knows he must not slay me, and he has instructed his men accordingly. So worry not about me. Go to Ithilien! And may the Valar speed you."*

*He nodded gravely. "I thank you. I shall return, I swear. Marek is going to be punished for all this. Fare you well." With this he carefully stepped out into the corridor and began to walk swiftly towards the kitchens, with the lion running after him. There was a call from the other end, he broke into a run, and swift footsteps of three men came after him, approaching my hiding-place on the landing. I stepped out when they had almost reached me and involved them in a fight. It was a brief one ere they overwhelmed me, but it gave Azrahil the time he needed to escape. Well, at least he managed to leave the fortress, and apparently they have not caught him yet, despite hunting for him far and wide. So do not be too surprised if he shows up in Dol Arandur soon. I know how much you enjoy having Southrons about the place.*

*As for what befell me afterwards, well, Al-Jahmir was furious when he found out what had happened. The prison-cells are now filled with the guards who failed him, and he would have avenged himself upon me somewhat cruelly, too, had not my state of health prevented him. Due to the loss of blood and my generally weakened condition, he refrained from hurting me further, although I fear that as soon as I am healed of this new wound, there is going to be some punishment. Moreover it is possible that soon we are going to leave this place, as it has become very insecure now with Azrahil on the run, and likely to reveal what information he has to Al-Jahmir's enemies. So, whatever you and Elessar and Imrahil and the others have in mind for my rescue, do not delay any longer, however great the risk. Should Azrahil indeed make it to Ithilien, he may turn out a very helpful ally.*

*Now I must end. The guard is going to come in to check on me any time now (they are not staying in my room anymore after what happened). I fervently hope you will not have to worry about a vacant Stewardship much longer. Despite the new injury, lately it seems my luck has improved. There are not many ways Al-Jahmir can tread now to win this game, and he knows it. If only he would finally accept his defeat. But unfortunately he is too proud and stubborn for that. Let this be his downfall!*

*My love to the boys, and especially to you. Remember, do not work yourself to exhaustion, but try and rest as well. When I return home, I want to see you as radiant as in my memory. So do take care of yourself, my wild shieldmaiden. I cannot wait to be with you again.*

*Faramir*