

*Khorazîr, Lord of Khiblat Pharazôn to Lady Éowyn of Ithilien, greetings!*

*Dear Éowyn,*

*first of all a very happy birthday to you! I hope this letter reaches you in time.*

*Actually, I was about to begin this letter with my best wishes for you and your family in the new year, but then remembered that the new year will not begin before almost three more months have passed. I think I shall never get used to this new reckoning! Nevertheless I hope all of you are well, and that the colds your boys and you suffered from trouble you no longer. Down here we are having a hard winter as well. They used to be like that during my childhood, and oft we blamed them on the Dark Lord, but since then the weather has hardly been that cruel in winter.*

*Thank you for your delighting account of your sons. I should very much like to see them. Most likely I would hardly recognise the twins anymore. They must have grown a lot since last I saw them. In Elboron's wish for a pony at this early age his Rohirric side must come through. I recall how much he enjoyed our rides together. I can well imagine that he wants a lion, too. They are fascinating creatures, but you are of course right in keeping him away from the lioness. By now it must be fullgrown and rather dangerous. Some people claim they can tame them, yet I do not believe this. I wonder what plans Azrahil has with her.*

*Speaking of the lioness and her master, has he by now left Gondor and set out on his journey? About a month ago he wrote that his journey was going to be delayed, for reasons you also mentioned in your letter. But he said he would leave before the Midwinter celebrations. Since then I have not heard from him, and none of my scouts stationed along the borders of this realm and even up as far as Poros has seen him pass, despite being ordered to look out especially for him. With the weather this bad, I understand his journey is going to be slow, nevertheless I cannot shake off a slight feeling of unease. As long as he travels through your husband's realm he should be safe enough, but south of the border things could be getting rough for him. Anyway, I will do whatever I can to secure his passage.*

*As you see, I cannot yet give you an account of his meeting with his mother, although not only you are curious as to how this is going to turn out. I shall add a few things about Narejde, however, since you inquired about her and the little ... matter that yet remains to be resolved. I will come to this in a moment.*

Before that I shall tell you a little more about the other lady most dear to me. Little Hanneh is not so little anymore. It still amazes me how swiftly they grow. So far she has not been affected by the bad weather. On the contrary, she seems to enjoy being outside on the battlements and watch the winddriven clouds cast shadows on the near hills, or the birds of prey sailing on the breeze. I often take her there, a large bundle wrapped in colourful clothes so that only her little round face with the dark eyes look out, and then I speak to her of what we can see. Whenever she discovers something new, she cooes, but as often she only watches in wonder. Sometimes I think she has fallen asleep because she is so silent, but when I look at her I find her wide awake. She seems to find joy in the smallest and most mundane of things. Her favourite place in the house is the small fountain in the courtyard. It seems she can remain near it for ages and simply listen to the sound of its tinkling, and watch the water catch the sunlight. When she feels unwell, which is seldom, thankfully, to take her to the fountain is a sure way to end her tears. It works even better than singing to her, which nevertheless delights her greatly.

I am not sure who she takes after in this. Both her parents are different, and so am I. Less patient, and less aware of and interested in music or natural beauty. There are moments when she reminds me of Dereja when she was young. She also had an eye for small details others would deem entirely unimportant, and be fascinated by them. Let us hope that Hanneh will be allowed to grow up in peace – and the same for your sons, of course –, for there is nothing better to destroy such gentleness than strife and war.

Speaking of people changed by these things, your account of your husband's health worried me. I admit I have always admired his constitution. Few people would have survived the wound I dealt him at our duel as easily as he did. To read now that whatever the snake Al-Jahmîr administered him may have caused lasting damage shows how evil the Umbarian truly is, and moreover how great his resources are – even now, when we all hope he is destroyed utterly. I do not think I will shock or surprise you by stating that he is still out there, biding his time, and waiting, as he always does, for a chance to strike again. For a few months we have had a respite from his malice during which he licked his wounds, but somehow, again, he managed to find allies again who now set out to assail us.

Less than a fortnight ago we felt the first tremor of his wrath, and immediately knew that the peaceful days were over. Well, I suspect the evil to originate from Al-Jahmîr, although I cannot be certain. If it is not him, then someone else has stung one of our eastern neighbours into troubling our borders. Almost daily there have been raids and attacks. So far we have not managed to get to the source of all this trouble, yet for me this strife has the Umbarian's dirty scrawl written all over it.

So whatever you do, be careful. Before his fall, as well you know, he wielded great resources even in the North, and had a network of excellent spies working for him. I doubt that this spider's

web has vanished, and in time he might be able to draw information from it again. As for your husband, despite your concerns, I do not think you need to fear he would simply pass away from some illness that gets passed around. Did not his imprisonment on Tolfalas show how much he is willing to endure to remain at your side. He must have more lives than a cat, and even if some of them have been spent recently, you can rely on him having quite a few in reserve. You are not going to get rid of him so swiftly, so much is certain!

Ere I turn to the matter of Narejde, I should like to add a few words about Túrin and his father. I was grieved to read about Lord Húrin's illness. I met him several times during my visits to the City, and came to like his friendly, jovial manner which seemed far more familiar and inviting than the awkward stiffness of some of the other lords display when coming face to face with a Southron. There are few words of comfort I can offer his family. I hope they stand by another during this difficult time, and that he may pass in peace and without pain or regrets, in the knowledge of a good life well spent.

I have thought a lot about what you said in your letter, how you envy that they had some warning of his imminent departure. I am not sure if I can wholly agree with you there. True, it is deeply painful to lose a loved person suddenly, without the chance of bidding them farewell. My father and brother went that way, as did my eldest son, and to this day I wish I had one more chance to talk to them. But I also know how devastating a long, long farewell can be. Looking back, I think I knew from the day Dereja fell ill, shortly after Aravôr's birth, that she would be taken from me. Because she knew. And although, as was her way, she always tried to keep up hope for me and the children, and despite me wanting to believe in her getting well again, part of me knew she would not. Perhaps not even the antidote, had it reached her in time, would have saved her. So for months I was torn between hope and despair, seeing all the time how her worry for our children and me increased her pains. We did have the opportunity to say farewell, but for Dereja's sake I sometimes wish it had not taken so long.

My apologies for letting such a dark mood reign this letter. I wish there was something truly joyful to tell from down here, apart from accounts of Hanneh, but I fear there is little. Ah, but I wanted to tell you about Narejde. Now, this is a ... difficult matter. Not that things have ever been easy with her, yet ever since I told her of Azrahil they have become even more complicated. Although she would never admit it, I believe she is truly afraid of meeting him face to face. Perhaps because she fears that the encounter would finally melt (or rather burst) this shell of ice she has wrapped round herself for protection, and that she would be forced to show emotion or even tender feelings at last.

Do I sound embittered? Perhaps. Lady Naeramarth and I have had a number of discussions these past days, and try as I would I could not get through to her. Right, so perhaps I am not the most patient and insightful of men when it comes to these matters, and perhaps my choice of

words has not always been the most fitting, nevertheless I cannot understand why she refuses to even speak to me about the things that trouble her. 'Tis not that I am a stranger to her.

Ah, but perhaps I should first describe the present situation to you before I resume my complaints. In my last letter I mentioned how she set out quickly again after Hanneh's birth, and how during the months that followed we rarely saw each other. She finally visited briefly about a month ago, mostly to fetch more provision for her rangers and to relay what tidings she had gathered along the borders. She did not even stay the night, but left again at dusk, despite a storm brewing in the East. All the time I had the feeling she was avoiding me on purpose, so there was no opportunity to get her into talking to me.

This opportunity presented itself five days ago, under strange circumstances. In the middle of the night I was woken by an agitated servant who informed me that Narejde had just arrived in the stables, alone and without the usual company of her guards. Knowing that something extraordinary had befallen, I swiftly dressed and followed the servant into the stables. It was a cold, windy night. The clear air and wet flagstones in the courtyard indicated it had rained earlier. When we approached the stables, I recognised Narejde's voice raised in angry discussion. She was arguing with one of the stableboys who stood touselhaired next to her wet and weary horse. She was leaning against one of the pillars, wreathed in a thick cloak that smelled strongly of damp wool and was so stained by travel that its original colour could not be recognised in the dim light. Even though her voice and choice of words for the unfortunate boy were proud and fierce, her stance indicated that without the pillar's support she would long have fainted. When I addressed her she jumped slightly, but did not turn, as if trying to compose herself before facing me. The stableboy was dismissed with instructions concerning her horse which, I gathered, had received some injury.

"We were attacked two days ago," she greeted me, and finally turned so that I could see her face. Obviously she had not had any rest since the attack, and had ridden most of the time. It was grey with weariness, only her cheeks had a red tinge as with fever. "Twelve men died, seven more are wounded. The rest -", she winced, then drew a deep breath as if something pained her, "the rest I sent after the attackers, to find out whence they came. I -" Again she winced.

"You need to rest," I interrupted her sternly. "Your account can wait till the morning. Come. By your looks you have not slept for several nights."

"Thanks for the compliment," she returned with a wry smile, which soon, however, changed into a drawn expression as she clenched her jaws, and clutched the pillar more firmly.

"Are you wounded?" I asked her concernedly, upon which, after a moment's hesitation, she nodded slightly. Before she could say more, I had stepped to her and despite her mild protest lifted

her into my arms.

"I can still walk, you know," she told me, yet she sounded all but convincing. Honestly, I doubt she would have managed one more step. "You will save your strength now," I commanded her. "Next time I am wounded, you can return the favour, if you like." Here she smiled faintly, her head now resting against my shoulder. That gesture touched me, although I doubt she did it on purpose. It was just her exhaustion speaking.

"That should be interesting," she murmured, then she closed her eyes. I think she lost consciousness, for she did not speak again until the healer examined her. Then she came round with a moan and a curse. She had received an arrow in the shoulder, from behind. Someone had broken off the shaft – I assume she herself, to prevent it from obstructing her movement, and the wound from bleeding too much – but the point remained in the wound which had become infected. Already when we tended her, and the healer drew forth the arrow and cleaned and sealed the wound she was burning with fever. For three days she hovered on the verge of consciousness, perhaps even on the verge of a darker kind of sleep. Only yesterday the fever finally abated, and when I visited her she surprised me with a mind wide awake, and a tongue sharper than ever.

When I entered her chamber, I encountered her in the process of leaving her bed. I told her to return there immediately, but she only shook her head. "I need to return to my men," she murmured, searching for her garments. "I have idled far too long here already."

"Wrong," I said, stepping over to her and taking her hand to lead her back to the bed. "According to the healer, you will have to 'idle' another fortnight. Aravôr is already on his way to the border, with two score men and well stocked with provisions. You will go nowhere for a few days at least, until you have regained your strength." She wanted to object, and actually tried to free herself of my hold on her hand. But I held it firmly. "Actually, I would appreciate if you stayed longer," I added, more gently. "We have seen each other so little of late."

"There was much work to be done," she muttered, without meeting my gaze. But at least she gave up her struggle and sat down on the bed. I lowered myself next to her and reached for a blanket to wrap around her, for she was visibly cold in her linen shirt.

"True," I agreed, "yet others could have done this work as well. The troublesome situation on the borders was not the only reason for your constant absence, was it?"

She gave me a sharp glance. "What do you mean?"

I sighed. "I had hoped you would explain it to me. Narejde, why will you not tell me what trou-

bles you? Is it the matter with Azrahil? Or is it because of me?"

"What troubles me most at the moment is the fact that someone has caused havoc in my company, and that most likely this someone has been sent by Al-Jahmîr. Neither Azrahil nor you play into this matter. And why did you send Aravôr? He has a family to look after now. I will be well enough to leave tomorrow or the day after. You cannot keep me here against my will."

I am not sure if she realised that her words hurt me. "I will not keep you here against your will," I told her, more coldly, perhaps, than I should have liked. "You are free to leave, of course, if wise counsel and maybe the knowledge that there are people here who care and moreover worry about you will not restrain you."

With that I left her. The following times we met, our conversations were little different. Yet leave she did not. Perhaps she thought about what I said. Or she realised that she is still too weak to set forth again. I am about to call on her now, in the hope her mood has changed, but honestly I doubt it. She can be even more stubborn than me.

Narvinyë 4th

Despite having written so much already, I thought you might be interested in how my latest conversation with Narejde turned out. The errand-rider is a sturdy fellow. He can carry a few more sheets.

Well, I found her on the battlements, where she stood facing the chill wind from the East that made her hair stream out behind her, and swirled the brightly coloured tassels of the blanket she had wrapped herself in around her. She stood still as a statue, gazing towards the distant mountains that were swathed in dark clouds. Yet she must have heard me coming, for, "You do not give up, do you?" she greeted me, without turning toward me.

"I can be very persistent, as well you know," I returned, stepping next to her.

"I am going to leave tomorrow," she stated.

"That is what you said yesterday," I reminded her.

She was silent for a while. "Yesterday the weather was too bad."

"Ah, I see." Silence again, longer this time. "I am sure there is going to be bright sunshine tomor-

row," I said, nodding toward the clouds looming in the East.

"Are you mocking me?" she asked, finally turning to look at me, a fierce spark in her eyes.

"You know I am not. Fact is, you are mocking yourself. You are making things far more difficult for yourself than they really are."

"Oh, and you know so much about me that you can judge what is difficult for me and what is not!"

Needless to say her words riled me. "It might be comfortable for you to believe that the entire world is against you, but in case you have forgotten, or chose to forget, rather, I am not your enemy. So there is no need to speak to me like that. I want to help you, but I can only do so if you tell me what troubles you. And do not claim you are alright, for it is plain to see you are not!"

She turned away from me, placing one hand on the rough stone of the wall. For a long while she was silent, then I heard her draw a breath. She drew the colourful blanket more tightly about herself with her other hand. "I am not alright," she at length conceded quietly. "The matter with Azrahil ... it came so suddenly ... I ... I did not expect my past to catch up with me like that. I am not sure what to do when I see him. Also, it brings up unwanted memories."

"Of Zohrân?"

She spun round to me. "I told you not to speak his name to me ever again!" she snapped.

I sighed. "Narejde, he has been dead for many years. I understand that what he did to you was horrible and hard to forgive, but do you not think that now that the situation is changed you can try and ... well ... forgive him? And move on?"

She snorted. "And this from the man who for twenty years pursued with hatred who he held responsible for his wife's death!"

"This from the man who learned his lesson, and who befriended the very man he sought to kill for so long!"

She bit her lip and turned to gaze at the mountains again. "It is different with ... Azrahil's father. What he did to me even his death cannot assuage. But I have also learned a lesson. What happen then is not going to happen to me again."

*"So you would rather spend the rest of your life trying to forsake all love or even friendship, out of fear that you could be hurt again if you showed only the slightest sign of warmth? Do not confuse gentleness with weakness, Narejde. And do not believe that every man is going to treat you the way he did. Have not the past years shown that things can be different?"*

*She merely shrugged. I admit I was tempted to go in that moment, seeing no hope in ever getting through to her. But then she looked at me inquiringly. "What is it you want, Khorazîr?"*

*"Do you not know? I thought it was obvious. For some time now I have been considering asking your hand in marriage. But you have not really given me an opportunity to do so lately, and with your coldness towards me - and everybody else, really - I have begun to doubt that it is a good idea at all."*

*Her eyes grew wide with surprise. "You want to marry me? Why?"*

*"Why do people marry, what do you think?"*

*She glanced at me, and there was something new in her eyes. "We speak of love now, do we?" she asked, but although her expression was still stern, her voice was less bitter, almost soft.*

*"If you wish."*

*Her pale cheeks blushed suddenly. "I was never sure what you felt for me," she admitted softly. "I knew you liked me and enjoyed my company, but I thought you were still in love with your wife. You ... you really love me, then? But I slew your relative, and I am bitter and stubborn and ..."*

*"Stop it!" I replied. "Dereja has been dead for almost thirty years. Yes, I still love her in a way, but she is gone. And you are here now, and I would like you to stay, as my wife. Because you are who you are. I would not have you otherwise." It pleased me to see how these words warmed her, and even made her smile slightly.*

*"But why marry?" she asked. "Why cannot things remain the way they are? Would that require me to sit here and do needlework day in day out?"*

*Now I laughed softly. "I would prefer you to keep the borders safe, only perhaps to spend less time there than before. Also, I would appreciate more of your counsel in matters of the realm. Not much would change, really, only your title. And your status here. You would not lose your freedom, if that is what you fear. Think about it. I know I am not your greatest love -"*

*"What do you mean by that?" she interrupted me, frowning. "I certainly never loved Azrahil's"*



father!"

"I was not speaking of him, but someone who, perhaps for the first time since your abduction, treated you – how did you call it – fairly?"

She snorted with indignation, yet her cheeks also flushed slightly. "This is ridiculous! I do not love him. I still feel obliged to him, true. Because he gave me a chance when no one else would. And in a way he brought the two of us together, did he not? So I owe him my gratitude for that as well. Perhaps, when he set me free I was a little infatuated with him, but that is long passed. Also," and now she turned towards me fully and reached for my hand, "who would want a boring Tark when she can have a fierce Southron instead?" she asked with a smile and a wink.

I returned it. "A just question. Will you think about my offer, then?"

She glanced at me thoughtfully. "Nay," she said at length, and upon my expression she added with a mischievous grin. "Because I have decided already. Even though I cannot think of a single sound reason why I should agree to so wild an idea, and marry an old man like you," she said teasingly, "I think I will give it a try. If you would still have me."

"I would," I replied earnestly. And thus the matter was settled. Something seemed to have thawed in her, for this evening, of her own accord, she began to talk about Zohrân and how she fared at Al-Jahmîr's court. She even allowed herself to weep in my presence, and I admit I almost did so myself as I had never seen her this emotional before. I believe she has lost some of her fear of the encounter with her son, too, so should Azrahil arrive now – which I hope he does soon – he should receive a far warmer welcome from her than would otherwise have been the case.

We have not decided upon a date for the wedding yet. Early summer, perhaps. We would greatly appreciate if you and your family could attend as well, yet I see the difficulties, with your boys still that small, and the roads hardly safe. Anyway, as soon as the date is set, I will make sure to send word. For now I shall end with mine and my family's best wishes for you and your loved ones. My regards to Túrin and his family as well.

Khorazîr