

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

*Dear Éowyn,*

*my sincerest apologies for not writing earlier. Much has befallen here of late. I am aware I should have sent word a long time ago, for surely you are interested in tidings of Azrahil. Of him I shall tell you in a short while. Fact is that he was the reason for certain upheavals down here. But more about that later.*

*I very much hope you and your family and friends are well. I will not deny I am rather worried about your long silence. Or perhaps it was not so long after all? Did you write lately? Or your husband? For it seems that not all messages got through. I know of at least four errand-riders who have been attacked and murdered, and their messages taken. One even appears to have been a herald of your King's on his way to Umbar. He and his guard were found slain near a well about a four days' ride north of the city. That is why I shall send this letter with extra protection and on a route less travelled, in the hope that it will reach you safely and without too much delay.*

*You may be interested in how Aravôr and Melike and little Hanneh are faring. All are very well. Although my son has taken over more duties in the realm lately, especially watching the borders and patrolling the roads to assure safe passage to merchants and errand-riders and other peaceful travellers, Melike sees to it that he also spends sufficient time at home to play with his daughter and witness her development. Not that he would want to miss any of that. She is more delightful than ever, still enjoying sitting by the fountain listening to its sound, or studying the patterns of the colourful tiles surrounding it – that is, when she is not shooting through the rooms on all fours hunting the greyhounds, all the time squealing merrily, or, as happens more often now, pulling herself up on a piece of furniture or the frame of a door and trying to walk a few steps. So far she has not made many attempts to speak actual words. She seems to be listening more than uttering sounds herself. But she appears to be understanding far more than she lets on, and from time to time I am under the impression she enjoys our antics in trying to make her speak, and silently laughs to herself because of all the funny sounds we make. Aravôr used to be quite like that, I recall. He did not speak for a long time, especially not to me (his brother told me much later that he had been conversing with him for quite some time), and then some day he surprised me with a number of rather difficult words.*

*Well, I hope there is going to be an opportunity for you to meet little Hanneh in person soon.*

*Since I have not had word from you or your husband, I do not know what your plans are concerning the wedding. The date is set for midsummer now, although it may be subject to delays should the situation worsen down here. I think I speak in Narejde's name also when I state we would both be delighted if you managed to come, despite the difficulties. After all, as she so rightly stated a while ago, you (and especially your husband) played not a small part in getting the two of us together. So both of you should witness when this bond is finally made official.*

*Aravôr also is looking forward to seeing the two of you again, as is Azrahil. Ah yes, Azrahil. As I have mentioned, the lad has caused us quite some trouble lately. The tale of how he finally got here is a long and exciting one. I tried to make him write it down himself, but he insisted that I should do so. So I will do my best, and his original account justice, hopefully.*

*Since he set out in the middle of winter, and moreover in a winter that must go down in history as one of the longest and hardest for a long, long time, his journey southward was fraught with hardship ere ever he reached the border of your husband's realm. Impaired by heavy rains and even snow and ice, he did not manage to cover more than a few miles a day ere he was forced to seek shelter. Since he did not journey on the Harad Road with its inns and resting places for travellers, food for his steed was scarce (apparently he had not reckoned with the land being that barren in winter, and thus had packed provision mostly for himself), and he had to stop often to let it find some. On the third or fourth day when he was riding close to sunset, he decided to cut across country a bit, and his horse tripped in a rabbit hole and went lame for a few days, confining him to a cheerless shelter in a forsaken coalburner's hut in the forest. He was quite annoyed with himself, he told me later, because of his own lack of foresight.*

*When his steed had finally recovered, he decided to make for the Harad Road which so far he had avoided to prevent getting spotted by too many prying eyes, having realised that a journey across the rugged country near the border would delay his journey more than he was willing to take into account. Although the weather did not improve, given the good condition of the road he managed to reach the new bridge over Poros without too much of a delay. But there he encountered another obstacle, in the form of the bridge-wardens. Oh, I am sure he is going to tell you husband all about their foul behaviour towards him - he was extremely put out about the way they treated him when he reported it to me.*

*Apparently they knew pretty well who he was, they had even received word from Dol Arandur to assure his safe and moreover speedy passage, nevertheless they harassed and insulted him - obviously some of them were fellows confined to service down in the remotest corner of Gondor as part of their punishment for some petty crime, and moreover ardent loathers of all Southrons. Needless to say Azrahil was unwilling to endure their spite, being the proud (and not always sensible, I should add) Haradan he is, and gave them a fitting return. Which caused them to deny him passage for some days, until their replacements in the form of a company of rangers*

arrived, the captain of whom he knew. Azrahil told me those came just in time to prevent him from either attacking the lousy bridge-wardens or else trying to cross the river elsewhere – which of course would have been a highly dangerous undertaking as, nourished by the constant rain, it was swollen with swift waters.

In the end he was allowed to cross. Unfortunately, during the time he had been forced to wait for his clearance in the little settlement near the bridge, he had been spotted by unpleasant folk, who had made his presence known to even more unpleasant company, and thus, when finally he travelled on into Harondor, and shortly after he left the main road again to take one less frequently used, he ran into a large and well-organised band of what at first glance seemed outlaws. Thanks to the speed of his horse which after the forced stay at Athrad Poros was well rested, at first he managed to avoid an encounter. But soon he realised that his pursuers knew the land too well, and were actually herding him further and further away from places where he might have encountered other travellers, or even your husbands rangers that patrol the borderlands regularly.

I trust you are familiar with the countryside just south of the river. 'Tis a wild, forsaken country, a tumble of rugged hills grown with hardy trees, and cut into deep folds and gullies by the many small tributaries of Poros. There are remains of old mines and settlements long deserted. A land of snakes and lizards, and other creatures that love warm stone and barren country, and of lone birds of prey that circle over the hills. Off the main roads there are few paths fit for horses or even mules and donkies. Azrahil did his best in trying to escape his pursuers. but they succeeded in chasing him into the tunnel of an old iron-mine that lies at the end of a long, narrow valley about a day's ride south of Poros.

"Realising I stood no chance of fleeing any further," he later described his situation to me, "I decided to at least go down fighting, instead of sitting in the dark cave waiting for them to get me. The mouth of the tunnel was half-buried by a heap of rubble that had come down the ceiling some time ago. Before I forced my horse through this narrow gap, I to their surprise turned onto them and attacked. I managed to cut down a few of them before they wisened up and withdrew into shooting distance, and began to rain arrows down on me. One hit my arm, and my horse got a scratch as well, but then I was inside the tunnel. And trapped. For by the time I had turned the frightened animal round in the dark, narrow space, ready to face them again, it became clear to me that obviously they wanted me alive. They had ceased shooting, and had blocked the entrance with a dense line of horsemen. I was rather surprised they did not kill me. I would have been an easy prey. But they had other plans with me.

"I do not know how I managed to force my terrified horse further down the tunnel. I noted that there were others going off in different directions, yet they were too narrow, and I knowing that without my steed I would be utterly lost in this wild country, I dared not dismount, despite the

horse snorting and sweating with fright, and moreover slipping constantly on the wet ground. My pursuers were following me. They lit torches which flickered and glistened on the wet reddish walls and ceiling of the tunnel – or the cave, rather, for in places it was quite large. Once they had passed through the narrow entrance in single file, they had closed the line again, and were advancing on me steadily and relentlessly. Others filed in behind them and began to scatter round the rest of the cave, their drawn blades glinting eerily in the light of the torches. When finally the horsemen started to dismount, a smooth, mocking voice echoed off the walls. “Please, sit and rest with us awhile. You’re no stranger to this company.”

Azrahil went on describing how from the the middle of the line a tall man stepped, dressed in soft browns in the shades of the desert sands. “And I recognised him,” the young man said, with a dark expression. To me he is no stranger, either, so let me tell you a little about this fellow: a young man in his early thirties, and thus several years older than Azrahil, yet in looks and built they resemble each other considerably, and even in the manner they bear themselves, and the way they talk. ‘Tis plain to see they are related. In fact, the man who hailed our young Umbarian friend was no other than Akarshân, Zohrân's favorite son. According to what Azrahil said Akarshân never liked him, and in childhood and adolescence always found ways to remind his little half-brother who was superior. Whereas Azrahil had always been ranked as the killer of the family, good enough only to do his uncle’s dirty work, Akarshân had been the front-and-center guy, the one who was introduced to the political circles, the one who threw the big parties, the one who kept things going. Despite actually being a bastard’s son, his status equalled that of Al-Jahmîr’s sons, which accounted for a bit of rivalry now and again, but also their constant competition honed their skills in politics and the quiet and discreet disposal of obstacles. But being one of Zohrân’s, that did not mean he felt above dabbling in a little bit of killing if he had a need to. Needless to mention, he was all but thrilled with the events of the past few months.

Now, upon recognising the man, Azrahil slipped off the “wrong” side of his horse, putting it between him and his half-brother. “A pleasure as always, dear brother,” he muttered.

In only a few strides, Akarshân crossed the distance between them, grabbed Azrahil by the throat, and slammed him against the cave wall. He spat in his face. “Give me a reason why I shouldn’t kill you here, blood-traitor,” Akarshân hissed.

“Because you need me for something,” Azrahil managed to say, silently cursing the fact he was not able to use his arm properly to defend himself.

Akarshân, obviously annoyed that his sand-louse of a brother came up with a clever answer, took his free hand, balled it into a fist, and dealt him a punch square across the face. He released Azrahil, who fell to the cave floor, landing on the arm that still had the short arrow in it. Part of the shaft broke, but not before the arrowhead twisted a little in the wound. “I have received a lot

of arrow-wounds in my life," Azrahil said, "but I cannot recall a single one that hurt so much. It took me a lot not to cry out, for I knew had I done so, my plight among these men would have been even more difficult. And it was hard enough, because while I lay on the ground in pain, Akarshân stepped away from me and motioned to the rest of the men. Many of them came over and raising me to my feet roughly, they started beating me up. Most of the men in the company were either distant cousins or long-time members of the household in one form or another, and thus they knew me as I knew them. They were under orders not to kill me outright, but, well, there is a lot you can live through."

At one point, Azrahil went on, he passed out. He woke again sometime in the night to find that the arrow had been removed, and that his arm had been bandaged somewhat half-heartedly. "But the rest of me was still bruised and aching," he said. "There was the nasty taste of stale blood in my mouth, and I was very thirsty. I soon slipped out of consciousness again and woke sometime the next day. To my surprise, I was not tied up, but when I tried to move I realised that I would not have been able put up much of a fight anyway. I was lucky I had no broken bones. When finally I managed to pull myself up on the wall into a sitting position, I saw that the cave and tunnels were fairly well-furnished with food provisions and equipment. Several of the men, including Akarshân, were not around. Someone threw a scrap of bread and a mouldy date at me, which, despite my burning hunger, I did not touch. There were some guffaws from the men idling about in the cave. I tried to count them to get a clearer idea of how many were still there, but my eyes were so swollen that I could hardly see. I stayed awake awhile, watching the men laze about, unconcerned. Then I passed out again from pain and exhaustion.

"I woke again to the sound of Akarshân chiding the other men. "Now, is this how we treat a beloved family member?"

A rustle beside me made me open my eyes to see a water bottle, two slices of bread, and a fig next to me. It was night again, and a crackling fire had been lit in the center of the cave. Akarshân came to sit between the fire and myself so that I could only see him as a dark form and hardly make out his features, crossing his legs and letting a hand rest on each knee. "After all, just because he has betrayed us and allied himself with the tarks does not give us a reason to be rude." He paused. "It gives us two.""

Azrahil said he expected him to throw sand or ash on the food or dump out the water, but Akarshân did nothing but sit and watch. "No, you deserve death at this moment, but I think you may have a chance to erase some of the disgrace you've brought upon yourself before you die."

He then went on to tell Azrahil of his plan. His chief goal was to avenge his father's death by destroying "that slave-whore" Narejde and, if the chance arose, me as well, just for good measure. Obviously he had some kind names to bestow on myself as well, but Azrahil was loath to

repeat them. Needless to mention, the name he had called Narejde did not go down well with her at all, which he learned when he was brought before her. But I race ahead of the tale.

Now, the plan was to lure us toward Umbar, and then ambush us in the hills before we would get near the city. There is a line of rugged, fairly uninhabited downs to the north-east of the great haven, marking the border of that realm. The swiftest route from Khiblat Pharazôn to Umbar leads over them, and even in times of peace (whenever we had those; I cannot really recall any) 'tis not an easy journey. No traveller goes there unless well armed and provisioned, or heavily protected by a large company of guards.

According to Azrahil, the planning took Akarshân and his henchmen quite a while, because they his quick capture ("hardly any fuss.") had surprised them. Obviously they spent a long time scouting the area and gathering information about our doings. Once preparations were complete, Akarshân had in mind to send a messenger to Narejde with a letter informing her that he had taken Azrahil prisoner, and planned on taking him to Umbar. "You are free to pursue us and we would delight in any sort of armed combat you should desire," this message said. Does that not sound cheesy and too contrived? But well, that is Akarshân's style. The message went on, "However, he dies if you come too close in your attempt to rescue him, or he dies if he reaches the great city and you have done nothing to save him. I would think a mother's love would eliminate one of those possibilities."

Obviously those in the upper circles of Al-Jahmîr's family had known Azrahil's background for quite some time, sooner, indeed, than he himself or Narejde learned of it. "But the second would be fitting, wouldn't it?" the message continued. "A traitor to his father's side of the family faces a betrayal of his own as his mother does not try to rescue him. Maybe one day a poet will muse on the quandary."

Now, you may wonder how Narejde reacted to this message. When it arrived, she had just returned from a short visit to her men stationed on the border, the first after her injury. She was in high spirits, which were then shattered by the message. Even though in a way she was looking forward to finally meeting her son, I think the longer she had had time to brood over the matter, the more anxiety waxed in her. To then learn that the first encounter with Azrahil was about to look very differently from what she had imagined even in her wildest dreams did not improve the situation, on the contrary. It was obvious how the message troubled her, and for the first time since I have known her she seemed unable (or unwilling) not decide upon which course to take. It was shocking to behold her state of utter doubt and indecision. Finally I resolved things for her, and told her that if she did not try to rescue the lad, and he was slain, she would never be able to forgive herself. Thus, reluctantly, she agreed to reply to Akarshân. But once we had set out, her old spirit returned, until catching Akarshân and freeing "her boy", as she took to referring to Azrahil, became almost an obsession with her. She was difficult to deal with during that time, but

honestly, I do prefer the fierce, determined Narejde to the doubtful, overly cautious and troubled one.

As for Azrahil, since it had taken his half-brother several weeks ere finally he sent out the message, he would have been feeling better and have recovered from the arrow-wound, he said, had he not received a daily beating from the men. This also prevented him from attempting to escape. Akarshân generally kept a mild eye on the proceedings, although he would interfere when things turned too serious. After all, Azrahil needed to be well enough to not slow them down once they set out for Umbar. Though his arm was treated fairly quickly after getting wounded, it was not healing well because of the beatings and the fact he was hardly allowed out of the cave to get some fresh air and sunlight. For weeks now he had been suffering from a slight fever that would not abate.

Time passed. Azrahil said that he was barely able to keep up his reckoning of the many days he spent in the dismal mine, in pain and utter anguish, and with no true hope of relief. And yet, true Haradan he is, he refused to give up and simply die, if only to perhaps repay Akarshân and his henchmen for their treatment. Finally the messenger returned with an answer along the equivalent of "rot in hell". I had suggested to Narejde to put things a little less insulting, if only to guarantee that Azrahil was not killed out of spite and anger, but she preferred a blunt reply. Yet apparently her answer was positive enough for the bandits to feel they could start heading to Umbar. They packed up camp, gave Azrahil a few more kicks ("their daily pasttime," he commented with a wry smile, "which they would not forgo for any reason"), and set out under the cover of darkness. Azrahil's hands were tied, and the rope stretched ahead to where it was tied to the saddle of one of the bandits. It was only a few feet of length, not enough for him to cause any real trouble should he try to pull the other saddle loose or upset the other horse.

Since unfortunately my scouts had changed their patrolling patterns since the messenger first showed up, as well as aided by sheer luck the bandits barely sneaked by without being discovered. Once they cleared that obstacle, they had relatively free passage to their hills. Nevertheless, due to the difficulty of the terrain and their need to use the darkness for cover in order to remain unspotted, their journey took them almost a fortnight. At one point they found out that Narejde and company were in the area, and by the looks of things were also heading for the hills. Their plan was to split up, because on an appointed place in the hills they met up with more of their fellows, so that their numbers were practically tripled from the first time Azrahil had encountered them. But that of course made it difficult for them to keep hidden, so that soon our spies informed us of their whereabouts, and also, because a lucky fellow managed to overhear some of their talk, of their plan to split up.

They intended to break into four groups, two groups on each side of a deep valley with a narrow stream at the bottom that only bears water in winter and spring. Each of these two groups

spread apart so they could block both exits once Narejde's company was inside. Azrahil was to be kept up on one hillside, away from the battle, with two guards who were under orders to kill him if "the signal" was given. From what we learned later, this signal was one long, one short, and one long flash of sunlight on a sword blade if the battle was to take place during in the day, and a flaming arrow shot straight up at night.

Our company was spotted passing through the foothills of the downs one late morning. Knowing that a trap was set for us, but unsure of its location, we approached cautiously, with our scouts roaming the area. We decided to split up as well, to ensure that at least one party would make it through alive, and also to try and ambush the ambushers. Despite being loath to part from Narejde because I feared she might be carried away and indulge in some rash action, I nevertheless agreed to lead the second party, and to set out in search of the hidden enemy, while she was to continue on the main road down in the valley. Well, and at one point we met our foes, or they met us, depending on one's point of view. A fierce, desperate and cruel battle ensued. I shall not bore you with a detailed account of it, but in its bloodiness and viciousness it reminded me of the fights we had with the tarks during the reign of the Dark Lord, and later on with the remains of his forces. There was relentless hatred on both side as many of our men and their families have suffered from the hands of the proud Umbarians, and were using the opportunity to repay them. Their hunger for vengeance made up for our scarcity in numbers. But none of the men, however strong the avenging fire burned in him, was able to reach up to Narejde's fury. That day she vividly reminded every one of the men she faced why once she chose Naeramarth as her name. Those who dared step into her path were cut down, and watching her I admit to being glad that I can call her my friend.

I and my company arrived on the scene later, fearing the worst for the sounds of battle had rung awfully in the barren hills. But soon we realised that the fight was going rather well for our side. Akarshân noticed that, too, and caused the signal to be given. I do not know how Narejde noticed it in the midst of fiercest *melée*. Later she was not able to recall what made her look up that very moment, even receiving an injury while doing so. Yet it was lucky she did, for she was able to observe in what direction it was being sent. Spotting three figures up on the hillside, led by instinct or something else, she decided to forgo the battle and investigate.

Lucky she had this insight, for up on the hill, things were not looking too good for Azrahil. His guards had their swords drawn and were taunting him. They had been too busy watching the battle to notice that Azrahil was unhooking the stirrup from his horse until it was just barely resting on its buckle. He grabbed it and hurled it at one of the guards' heads, sending him crashing to the ground – quite a feat for someone who still has his hands tied at the wrists, I daresay. The other guard lunged forward, frightening the horse, which whinnied and bolted away, leaving Azrahil defenceless. He managed to dodge blows several times, but then received a cut on his leg. This slowed him down, and the blood flowing made the rocks slippery. He slipped and fell,



and as he rolled away he got a long cut on his side. Since he was also still feverish from the infected wound in his arm, and still weak from his rough treatment, these new injuries and the lack of blood drained his last reserves of strength quickly. He landed on his belly, too exhausted to keep moving. "I think I just waited for the blow that surely was going to come," he said, "and honestly I welcomed it." But then he heard a shout, and the blow never arrived.

Azrahil passed to the clash of metal on metal. Narejde and the guard fought it out, but he had the advantage since she was tired from the battle on the low ground. Blood was spilt on both sides. Finally she brought him down, but not before he gave her a nasty cut on her side as well. Having followed her, I found her leaning against a rock in the shadow of the hill. As I approached, I saw her sliding down to the ground to ease some of her discomfort. She was yearning to go over to the still figure lying in a puddle of his own blood out in the bright sunlight, but she lacked the strength to get up again.

I had left my men to deal with the remainder of Akarshân's company, and sent out others to hunt down the stragglers who tried to run for it (including their leader, the coward!), then I and some of my household men hurried towards Narejde. When I reached her side to see to her injuries and make sure she was alright, she urged me to first find out who was lying nearby. Reluctantly I agreed, naturally being more interested in her welfare than that of a stranger, but when I stooped over the man I recognised him as Azrahil. He was barely alive, and in a dismal condition. Carefully we rolled him onto his back and cut the ropes from his hands. He stirred, making a ragged gasp for air, coughed up some blood and went back to breathing only shallowly. The others began tending to him as best they could. Since we had to camp in the area anyway and the day was advanced rather far already, in order to move the injured as little as possible, the men simply pitched a tent about him to shelter him from the sun.

I returned to Narejde to inform her about the man's identity. It did not surprise her at all as she seemed to have known it instinctively. Nevertheless, at my words her entire body sagged, and her head which she had craned towards us as we had examined Azrahil sank back against the rock. I realised that she was trembling slightly. "He is dead, is he not?" she whispered hoarsely. "We came to late, I know it." She closed her eyes.

I reached out to gently wipe some grime and blood from her cheek, and tears, too. "He lives," I told her softly. "He is badly injured, but he is alive." At this her eyes flew open and she stared at me, relief radiating from her like heat. "I must ... I must see him," she muttered, trying to pull herself up on my arm.

I shook my head, gently pressing her down again. "You are no use to him if you do not rest first. He is in good hands. The healer is looking after him. I promise I shall inform you should there be any change in his condition. But right now there is nothing you can do for him, and if you do not

get your wounds treated, it is doubtful you will see the next day. And I will not let that happen."

She looked at me almost pleadingly, but I hardened my heart against this, and at length she nodded faintly. And passed out.

Well, the next hours were spent seeing to the wounded and sorting out the dead, who were buried beneath a pile of fallen rocks some way up the slope. More men were sent out to hunt down the escapees, and to look especially for Akarshân, and a messenger was sent back home to inform Aravôr of the outcome of the venture. Who could, rested. Narejde's wounds were tended, and she slept for the rest of the day and most of the night.

But when I called upon her in her tent early the next morning to check on her, she was not there. I found her, no surprise, in Azrahil's tent, at his side, bathing his brow with a wet cloth. His fever had worsened during the night, and his breathing was so shallow that at times it was questionable if he was going to draw another breath at all. I somehow had expected her to weep seeing him like this, with every sign pointing towards his death, but when I looked into her face I could detect no sign of tears. Her expression was set, hard and stern and defiant, and her eyes were burning with determination, as if with her look alone she wanted to frighten death away should he dare reach for her son, or even enter the tent.

"He refuses to surrender to the shadow," she said softly, but with undeniable pride. "And I told him I would not let him in any case. And you, dare not drag me away from his side!"

"I would not dream of it," I said, meaning it. No one in his right mind would try and cross her will when she is in that mood.

For a while neither of us spoke, but as I watched her, her expression softened. "People said he resembles his father closely," she said suddenly. "And I feared they would be right. He does look like him on first sight, but there is even more of his grandfather in him, my father, from what I recall of his features. And his recent decisions and actions have shown he is none of them in spirit, either. Praised be the Valar for that!"

"So, the poor lad is more tark than he knows," I commented, more to myself. But she heard and let out a short laugh. "Yes, indeed. I doubt he is going to like that. It is going to be a shock for him when he learns of it ... if he -" Her voice broke, and the damp cloth slid from her trembling hand as she clapped it to her eyes. I reached out to touch her shoulder carefully. "Leave me," she lashed out, but I drew her close, and she did not struggle, but hung in my arms weeping as I never thought she would allow herself to. It was as if all those tears she had never shed over the years burst out of a sudden. It was heartwrenching to witness, but I truly believe she felt better afterwards.

*She remained at Azrahil's side well-nigh night and day, tending him, until slowly signs of his recovery began to assert themselves. But when finally he regained consciousness, of a sudden she would not go near him anymore. I do not know how she managed to, yet somehow she kept herself hidden from him even when he was strong enough to leave the tent. Her own injuries on the mend, and in the knowledge of her son being in good hands, she joined the hunters to try and track down Akarshân. Honestly, I was at a loss about her strange behaviour, but she was obviously terrified to meet him. Azrahil inquired about her repeatedly – I think somehow he knew she was around – but all I could tell him was that his mother was out hunting his tormentors.*

*Finally, on the very day we were about to set out for Khiblat Pharazôn again, she returned, with Akarshân in tow, who naturally did not look too happy about this turn of events, although he was almost unscathed, and to this day remains our prisoner because we hope to learn from him more about Marek's present whereabouts. The tale of how she caught him will have to wait for another letter, for I daresay you will be more interested in an account of the first true meeting of mother and son.*

*In fact, that was a rather strange scene. We had already mounted when my scouts informed me of a small company of horsemen approaching down in the valley. Soon we recognised Narejde. She spotted us as well and halted her horse while her companions with the prisoner continued up the slope towards us. I noted that Azrahil was watching her with an anxious expression, then gave me a questioning glance. I nodded, gave him an encouraging smile, and off he rode. I do not know what they spoke during that first encounter, but I could see how at one point they shook hands, with a formality which looked so utterly ridiculous that I could not restrain myself from calling down to them that they should stop behaving like total fools. Which they took to heart and finally overcame their reservations and embraced. I do not know if any tears were shed on either side. If so, they were careful to wipe their faces ere they returned to us.*

*Later, Narejde complained I should not have interfered, but I know her well enough by now to be certain that actually she appreciated the little nudge. During the homeward journey she and Azrahil had plenty of time to exchange tidings, and although there is still some slight awkwardness between them, they are getting along splendidly. Of course either is too proud to admit it. When I asked her what she thinks of her lad now she has finally met him, she would only say that considering his parentage on his father's side, he is a surprisingly good and brave fellow. Actually, from her lips this is high praise indeed. Even though she is loath to admit it, deep down she is mightily proud of him and the way he has constantly managed to fool and defy the Al-Jahmîrs. And he for his part seems to be equally proud to be able to call the most dreaded woman in all of Haradwaith his mother.*

*Well, and that is it for now. I very much hope this letter gets through to you alright, for otherwise*

*I shall be displeased somewhat greatly for writing all this down just for the entertainment of one of our foes. My hand has been aching this past hour. Thus I shall close now, in the hope to see you and your husband at our wedding, where you will be able to witness first hand how mother and son get along now. Ah, one small thing I should add. A few days ago a man arrived here with a complaint. His father keeps goats on highlands not far from the castle, and during the past weeks has lost several of his beasts to a strange predator. I sent some men to investigate, and they managed to catch a glimpse of the creature, although they were not able to catch or slay it. It was a lioness. When Azrahil learned of this, he and Narejde set out immediately. They have not returned yet, thus I cannot tell you what they found. We rarely see lions in this area, although their appearance is not unheard of after long, hard winters. But he seems to suspect that this particular lioness is his, which he left in your keeping in Ithilien. She has not escaped thence, has she? It would be truly remarkable had she come all the way down hither to seek her master.*

*Anyway, I shall call an end now. My best wishes for you and your family! Hopefully we will meet soon.*

*Khorazîr*