

*Dear Faramir,*

*The rain and overcast skies today reflect my mood perfectly. Our guests here have strained my patience and sanity, and they have hardly been here more than a few days. Discussions began the morning of the 5th, and lasted all morning and well into the evening. This has been the schedule for the past three days. I do not know how you manage to survive formal Council meetings. The obstinance and pettiness of certain members is almost overwhelming. After the first day of talks it felt like we had achieved nothing except the appreciation of the sound of our own voices. Is it always like this? I found it a blessing to be called away to see to the children. I could leave and come back an hour later and have missed almost nothing of value. It all seems so superficial. Today was a break from discussions, to give us all time to complain about each other behind our backs, I suppose, and tomorrow we'll resume where we left off. I cannot say I look forward to it. At least I had today to give our children my undivided attention.*

*Elboron has discovered the frogs in the garden. I believe yesterday (or was it the day before?) was the big discovery. Khorazîr had taken him outside (since I had to throw him out of our discussions on the first day, but more on that later) in the afternoon, and when discussions broke for supper, I had a little boy tripping over his own words as he tried to tell me how big frogs are (bigger than toads, apparently) and how slimy they are (but this isn't disgusting, apparently) and how quickly they swim in the water (very quickly). He wanted to bring one in to show the twins, but I told him that the "no toads in the house" rule applies to frogs too. I doubt this rule will stop him when he gets a little older, though.*

*As for the twins, little has changed since I last wrote. Meriadoc still hates being put on his tummy, but now he tolerates it for a few seconds before he starts wailing. I took into consideration what you said about him perhaps not liking the idea of everyone towering over him, so I tried putting him on our window seat, and he certainly did not like that any more than the rug. It looks like he simply does not like being on his front. Peregrin, on the other hand, still seems to enjoy the experience. I told him you think he should learn to like eating more, but he hasn't taken those words to heart. He eats so slowly that sometimes after he's finished I barely have enough time to do some other chore before Meriadoc wants to nurse again. I hope he outgrows this soon!*

*Teherin says I should not be too worried about Peregrin as long as he is indeed eating. It is good to have her back, even though she spends much of her time scouring thick, dusty books again. She returned with several books from the library, even a few that the librarians do not know she has, and has been studying them rigorously. She did not like the description of the poison's effects from your last letter but did say that knowing the origins helped greatly.*

*Coming to that now, your conversation with this Azrahil was astounding and rather unnerving. If he knows about Aiglos, why has he not done anything about it? Does he not tell the Snake just so he can personally have something to hold over your head, out of spite? He is very observant, too observant. Honestly, I do not know what to think about him. He knows about our letters and the wine, yet he refrains from informing his uncle. Surely he is not this light with you without some*

*sort of purpose behind it. You are a better judge of character than I am, though, so I will have to trust what you say. But please, tread cautiously around him. You do not know what it will take, great or little, for him to end all of this with a few words.*

*Now for our attempt to end this. We have more friends than enemies here for these discussions, which is a relief. Elessar is here, as are Éomer, Imrahil, Amrothos, and Túrin (attending on behalf of his father). Falastur and Caranthir are here as well, and they have done little to speed things along. Khorazîr was part of this until he and Falastur started exchanging comments. I had to ask him to leave before things escalated to the point where more harm than good was done. He was not pleased by this, but left without further comment.*

*Thinking back over these past few days, I find it hard to come up with anything solid that we've decided. Early on we reached the obvious agreement that Gondor cannot sanction any negotiations with Al-Jahmîr, but that seems to be the only time we have agreed. Pelargir have done an excellent job of dragging their feet. Your guess of Falastur's actions was fairly right-on. He initially proposed a plan to hunt down Al-Jahmîr and his companions and annihilate them all. Needless to say, this was quickly opposed by the rest of us. From what I have seen over these past four days, I do not think he seriously intended to pursue this plan anyway. He has slowly and deliberately modified his stance, but this seems to be more of a delay tactic than anything substantial. I doubt he came here for any other reason than to annoy us all and find whatever gossip he can. Falastur also brought someone with him named Tarostar. No one knows much about him, and Pelargir certainly is not volunteering information. He appears to be rather young, well-dressed, and is taking meticulous notes throughout all of our proceedings. He has not said much but keenly observes everything that goes on. I cannot tell if this is some mischief of Falastur's or not.*

*But, I digress. For all the nay-saying I have done, I must admit that our talks are starting to move in one direction. I would not be surprised if by the end of this we have mainly delaying-tactics lined up. Al-Jahmîr's letter gave us precious few details to work with, so we are going to try to get him to tell us more in his next letter (once again, having Aiglos has reduced the pressure unfathomably). I will be sure to put in a request for proof that Al-Jahmîr is not toying with us and really has you alive. He will probably not like this, but who knows, perhaps we may get praise for being such careful and cautious negotiators, not rushing in without assurance that our prize exists.*

*After this, though, our path becomes less clear. Technically we cannot do much until we receive a response, since we are not supposed to know as much as we do. I had sent someone to follow Al-Jahmîr's messenger, but he was discovered and turned back with the stern warning that this would be a quick way to get you killed.*

*I am getting somewhat nervous with this deadline approaching in only a few days. I am not as eloquent in politics as you are, and now my skills are being tried at a high price. You tell me not to worry, that nothing I can do will change what Al-Jahmîr has planned, but I cannot help but wonder if something I say will push him one way or another. I cannot image that he would end this before he had gotten some sort of reward for himself, but then I can also see him being pleased enough with whatever chaos this contributes.*

*Enough of this. It is late and I am tired, thus making it difficult to keep gloomy thoughts at bay. I have not had the opportunity to visit the walnut grove, since today it has rained and the other days were otherwise busy. But I shall make an attempt to go there soon. However, I do not like that you accuse me of cheating. I have never cheated at archery and do not see the need to begin now. I would prefer that you did not spread such nasty lies about me like this. Otherwise I should have to defend my integrity. Surely you would not force me into such a situation?*

*Fare you well for now, my love. Please be cautious. I doubt these next days will be as "carefree" as these past ones have been, once my message is sent out. The Umbarian will not be happy that I have not offered him anything substantial, yet.*

*But there is still time before that. Until then, do not do anything to bring undue attention to yourself. I have promised Elboron and the twins that their father will return to them, and this is a promise I am loathe to break.*

*Never forget, I love you always.*

*Éowyn*

*P.S. Teherin wants to know if you have seen any myrtle bushes while you've been walking around. She was disappointed to learn that the poison loses its potency after a few days. She had been studying a substance with similar characteristics to what you face, but that information combined with the effects you mentioned has closed that path. She is on the trail of another venom now, may she have better luck with that.*