

Dearest Éowyn,

I do not know how Aiglos managed to find me. In any case he must be smarter than Al-Jahmír and his men, for they have been hunting me these past five days. Yes, I am free. But as the fact I am not home yet shows – and indeed my very improvised choice of writing materials (do not fear, the blood is not my own but from a rabbit I caught) –, my situation has improved only little.

So, what befell here? Three days after I sent my previous message, when darkness had just fallen and the storms, which had been very violent indeed down here, had abated, I was fetched, bound, and brought upon the corsair's ship. Most of Al-Jahmír's men were there, and the Umbarian himself came shortly afterwards. I was locked in a small cabin, where I remained for two more days. Ever since Azrahil's escape, I had reckoned with and indeed feared Al-Jahmír's revenge, but I was not hurt in any way. Indeed I hardly saw him until he came aboard. He must have been very busy preparing our departure from Barad Gwaelin and hunting Azrahil. Another explanation for his total disregard of my person I cannot offer.

What I had noticed, however, and the suspicion increased on the journey, was that Al-Jahmír's men held me in awe and were even afraid of me. Obviously the account of how I had freed Azrahil had spread, and, after the manner of gossip, grown. From what I managed to catch of the guards' talk, there were rumours I possessed uncanny magical powers and was able to talk to animals. Also there was a story going on that I had cursed the entire venture, and now people were falling ill or even dying because they had dared lay hands on me.

These rumours found their way on board as well, and the sailors, even more superstitious than the guards, embellished them in their own way. And people were falling ill indeed. Most of the guards were affected in some way. Some said the water or food had been cursed. Perhaps they were not so far off the mark. After all, Zinizigúr was still unaccounted for, and I believe the formidable old lady avenged the death of her apprentice in her own special way. Given more time, I might have managed to use this situation of fear and growing irritation to my advantage and encouraged a real mutiny among the men. But for this I had too little contact with the crew.

At first I had no indication whether the ship was bound. But on the third day of our voyage I was finally allowed out of my cabin and brought on deck. It was evening, in the west sky and sea were aglow with fierce colours, while in the east stars were already visible. There was a strong breeze from the west blowing. The ship had not long passed a rocky headland that was now to the north of us. Al-Jahmír stood in the stern, watching the dark coast recede. When I was brought to him, he greeted me with a thin smile. Pointing towards the headland, he said: "I thought you might want to wave farewell to Tolfalas and indeed to Gondor, for it is unlikely you will see it again."

My reply was rather different from what he had expected. Perhaps it had been an oversight of the guards, but I had been brought on deck unbound. They had not even searched me, and thus I still had the dagger I had returned to the crevice outside my window ere I had set out to free Azrahil, and retrieved again afterwards and hidden underneath my clothes. I did not think of the dagger, however, when I beheld the coast getting smaller and smaller. I did not listen to the Umbarian's talk, either. I had found a gap in the railing, waited for a moment when he was not watching me but the coast, ran, and leaped.

The water was colder than I had expected, and although the cut on my side had healed well, it burned like fire in the seawater. I had judged the distance to the coast to be about one mile, perhaps two, but it seemed far more. Only after a short while I was chilled to the bone, and the high waves and heavy current made things even worse. Although I was clad in light garments only, as soon as they were soaked they became heavy as lead, so I struggled out of the long tunic and discarded belt and shoes, for else surely I would have drowned. Nevertheless

I swallowed enough seawater to last for a lifetime. Each moment I reckoned with getting hit by an arrow or one of the nasty barbed harpoons the corsairs use.

But I was spared. The growing darkness and turbulent sea saved me, I think. It took the men long to lower the two small boats and take up pursuit, and the large ship needed even longer to turn about, and then it could not follow me for long because of the cliffs and dangerous currents about the headland. One of the small vessels almost got me, though. Shortly ere we reached the cliffs, when my strength was well-nigh spent, they had reached me. One of the men cast a net over me, and I got entwined, but with the help of the dagger managed to cut myself loose again ere they could collect me. Then a large wave caught the boat and we were being pulled apart. Somehow I found a way through the cliffs, swimming on the tide, until, more dead than alive, I was washed ashore on a narrow, stony beach surrounded by high cliffs.

I must have lain there for a while, for when I woke again night had fallen. When I looked out to sea, I could dimly descry the lighting and the black silhouette of the ship, and a glint of metal not far away told me one of the boats had found the passage to the beach as well. I withdrew under the shadow of the cliffs where even the gentle starlight would not find me, and thus, by luck, I came upon the cave. I only heard it first: the sound of the waves in a large cavern. Having no other place to hide, for the boat had just reached the beach and men were wading ashore, I braved the angry sea a second time, swimming out a little and then letting myself wash into the cave. It was far larger than I had thought, and consisted of more than one chamber. Where the force of the waves slackened near the rear wall, I found a narrow shelf covered with all kinds of flotsam, mostly seaweed and pieces of wood. I climbed up, detected a corner where the weed was almost dry, and in the hope the tide would not mount that high and wash me away, and that my pursuers would not find me, I curled up in the weed (well, in fact I collapsed from sheer exhaustion) and fell asleep.

When I woke again, to my surprise I found some faint light filtering down into the cave through crevices high up in the ceiling. The water was about as high as when I had arrived (although the growth of seapocks on the rocks indicated that it had risen somewhat higher during the night), so I reckoned I had slept for about twelve hours. I could have done with more rest, for my body ached all over and I felt spent. But the cold had woken me. My clothes were not dry yet, and I was shivering. Also I was very hungry, and even more thirsty.

Not daring to leave the cave yet, for I was sure the men were still searching for me outside, if only to find my body, I set out to explore the cavern and to find fresh water and something edible. I remembered the days when Boromir and I had spent our summers in Dol Amroth and there had roamed the coast and beaches with our cousins and the children of the local fishermen. In one year those children had devised a special kind of test for us "soft townfolk", as they called us. It consisted of proving one's courage by eating all kinds of sea-creatures they found under rocks or in pools during low tide. Back then Erchirion won this "competition" because he was very small still and ready to eat anything. Well, I must admit I almost followed his example. Some of the seaweed is not too bad, actually, and those sea-shells that look like rocks are edible as well. There were plenty of those in the cave, although they are difficult to loosen from the surface they sit on, even with the dagger. Water was a problem, however, and I had to climb about a lot ere I found a small crevice with rain-water.

Despite the cold, I decided to spend another night in the cave, to make sure the hunters outside were convinced I had foundered, or been washed ashore at another place. The night was miserable, so much so that ere dawn I decided to depart despite the potential danger, and the fact that to leave I had to swim. I had hardly slept, and thus been able to study the tide. When low tide set in, using the current, I swam out. The wind had lessened, and thus it was less dangerous to navigate between the cliffs and rocks. That way I reached another beach, broader this time, and journeying along it, searched for a way up the cliffs.

The southern tip of Tolfalas is a barren, forsaken country. I found one deserted fishing hut where I sheltered for a night, and some ruins, but so far I have not come upon an inhabited settlement. I have made my way to the south-eastern side of the island, still close to the coast, because it is easier to find food there that can be eaten without cooking. Also there are some patches of woodland here, mostly pines and hardy evergreens that provide

some protection against the ever-blowing wind, and shield one from unfriendly eyes.

For Al-Jahmir and his men are more keen-eyed and attentive than I thought. Somehow they must have spotted my escape from the cave, for they have been pursuing me hotly ever since. Whenever I look out to sea, I descry the corsair's ship cruising there, and when I rested in the hut they almost caught me again. Not long, I fear, and they will have discovered this little hiding-hole as well (I am sheltering underneath a large gorse-bush surrounded by rocks right now, and sacrificing a piece of my blanket – some old sailcloth I found in the hut – to reply to you).

So this is my present situation. I am going to try and make my way further north where there are more settlements, but to be honest I am not sure if I can evade capture much longer. Even with my full strength and unhurt the past days would have taken a toll on my health, and like this ... At least the past days have been sunny and fairly warm, for else I would have perished from the cold, I think. Please tell Elessar and Imrahil and whoever else is out there looking for me to come here as swiftly as possible. I do not want to sound impatient or ungrateful, knowing how much they have done already, but things are serious, and there is no use saying otherwise. Still, at least now they can strike at Al-Jahmir without having to fear for my safety. If they hurry.

Dusk is falling, and I have not replied to anything you have written yet. Do not believe that because right now I have other worries I am not interested anymore in what passes at home. Your account of the children delighted me, and made me smile for the first time in days. You cannot imagine how precious these moments of joy have become to me. They have been very rare of late. Ah Éowyn, more than ever I wish this to be over. Now I am free, and yet a captive on this cursed island. I marvel about Azrahil, and how he managed to escape. He truly is a remarkable young man, and I am sure your brother is going to overcome his mistrust of him soon. And if there is any way to do so without endangering the children, please free Pharzi off the cage. During the past months I have realised how very precious freedom is, and for a creature like her it must be pure horror to be locked away behind bars.

For now I must end, for the light is failing. How I envy Azrahil and everybody else back home who can enjoy your company! They do not know how lucky they are.

*My love to you always,
Faramir*