

*Dearest Éowyn,*

*my apologies for not sending word immediately upon my arrival here yestereve. I hope you did not worry over much, for there is no reason. Since I entered the City I have hardly had a moment to myself. On the very evening of our arrival I was called to a meeting with the King. I daresay it was important, and lasted for hours. He released me only when he realised that I was about to fall asleep in my chair. Today I spent most of the time in council, except for an hour around noon for a swift lunch. Now I feel spent accordingly. I doubt I am going to last long tonight. I hope you and the boys are well. Has Elboron found Horsey again? On the way hither I recalled that he had taken it to the stables with him when we visited the kittens. Perhaps you should have a look there.*

*The journey was uneventful and only hindered by the bad weather. I remember you complaining in summer about me giving too much attention to the repair and maintainance of the roads, instead of seeing to other pressing matters concerning the fief. Yet the journey proved that time and money have been spent well. Otherwise we would not have reached the City as swiftly and safely as we did – although nothing could save us from the icy downpour from above or the chill winds. By the time we forded Sir Carnen we were well-nigh drenched by the relentless rain. Poor Azrahil. For someone used to heat and scorching sunlight this cold, wet weather must be even more difficult to bear than for the rest of us. It looks like he caught a cold on the journey, too. As if he needed it to make his days here uncomfortable.*

*Today he spoke in council for the first time, and although he was only asked to give an account of my abduction and ensuing transport to Tolfalas, as well as his background at Al-Jahmir's court in Umbar, the hearing soon turned into a trial. Certain nobles (need I mention names?) attacked him with shrewd questions. There was little I could do for him. Somehow he managed to hold his temper, yet it cost him much as there were aimed at his honour. I doubt he looks forward to the days to come under the circumstances. Prejudice against all folk from the lands south of Poros and especially the Umbarians is greater than ever. There are some lords, mostly of the remoter fiefs who have no direct dealings with the Southrons that ask for strict measures against Harad, thus endangering the admittedly fragile peace we have enjoyed recently.*

*Ah Éowyn, I had forgotten how tedious and frustrating council-work can be, and I have only been here for a day. Yet I cannot simply withdraw, for although Elessar and I and Imrahil and some others are of like mind in this matter, there are too many who promote another war against the South. Of course these ideas are far from new. Ever since Elessar's campaign against the Umbarians there is a widespread believe he treated them with too much lenience. But never before have they dared voice their opinions so openly. They say Gondor must display its strength more forcefully, and come down heavily on those who oppose us. But war has never solved problems, only created more, and I for one would not see what peace we have laboriously established over the years destroyed.*

*I sound quite dejected, do I not? Perhaps 'tis my fault. I set my expectations too high. I thought that people would actually welcome my return and listen to my counsels. I should have known better, I guess. Already I had to face accusations of fraternising with the sworn enemy of Gondor (serious ones this time), as well as remarks that my long absence from council casts doubt on the extend of my care for the good of the realm. It cannot be, it has been murmured (loud enough for all to hear, of course) that the Steward is allowed to spend an extended holiday with his family while others have to see to his duties. Elessar made clear that I stayed in Ithilien with his expressed leave, yet his statement did little to mollify them, only caused remarks like "King's pet".*

*Imrahil, Amrothos, Túrin and his father supported me, of course. As did others. Elessar for a long time only listened. It was plain to see, however, how at times he strove to remain calm, until finally he spoke. I am not sure, but I believe he took Falastur aside for a quiet (or not so quiet) word after council, too, since of course it was him who caused the most mischief. He is none of the war-mongers, so much I must attest him. He knows that*

war with Umbar would impair trade in Pelargir as well, and Falastur prefers to see his treasuries filling instead of wasting ships and men (and money) in a campaign against the corsairs. Yet when it came to discrediting Azrabil and me he was foremost. Still, I am curious if the Lord of Pelargir is going to be as openly hostile tomorrow. His role in and the attitude he openly proclaimed during my rescue is still debatable, and Elessar is not a man to overlook such details. Falastur is playing a dangerous game. I doubt that with all his shrewdness he has foreseen the full measure of what he has put into motion. However, even with people like Carandil gone, he has won quite a large following in council. None of them would go as far as to commit treason. 'Tis rather that he has subtly managed to convince them that I do not fill my office with the dedication it deserves, and that moreover I have ... how did he put it so nicely ... "dangerous friends".

And I am not even their prime target. Azrabil has come to occupy this unfortunate position. He seems to exemplify everything they hate and fear about the Haradrim – or fear in general. This is the main reason for their reaction, I reckon. They are afraid that what happened to me might befall them as well.

As for Azrabil, I assume he suspected something like this to happen. When we set out he was quite cheerful as you may remember. Obviously he looked forward to the journey. If he felt anxiety at having to face the assembled Gondorian nobility, he hid it well. But during our journey soon he fell silent. Even his complaints about the weather ceased after a while. When we reached Sir Carnen he halted his horse and looked about uncomfortably, recalling the attack upon my company in Nenimë. Needless to say I also remembered the incident more vividly than I should have liked, and even Narák was uneasy. It was quite a struggle to make him wade the river.

For the rest of the journey Azrabil did not speak much. Only when we drew nigh to the City he stirred from his brooding and remarked upon the sight. He had not been to Minas Tirith before, only seen it from a distance, and although the light was already failing, with the dark clouds cloaking Mindolluin's shoulders behind it the City provided an awe-inspiring sight indeed.

Our servants greeted us warmly. Haleth saw to it that Azrabil was provided with everything he needed, then she questioned me relentlessly about you and the little ones. She cannot wait to see the twins. I had to describe every detail of their looks to her, and repeat all words Elboron can speak already – which, I realised, have amounted to a lot. She hardly let me change into dry clothes, for when I had ended my account she filled me in with all the gossip she thought important for me to hear. I shall tell you when I return as it would fill several letters. She and the kitchen staff and the other servants send greetings, as well as the cake I have sent with the message – I do hope it reached you intact, otherwise the errand-rider is going to be in trouble.

Imrabil and his son send greetings as well, as does Túrin and his family. He apologises for not having written to you for such a long time, and fervently hopes we will manage to bring our family over for the Midwinter-feast. Vorondil seems to miss his friend Elboron. I have not yet managed to visit Visilya and the little one, but I am invited to dinner tomorrow. Although I very much look forward to it – 'tis going to be a nice change from strenuous council-work –, there is an aspect of it that saddens me.

For there is a reason to Túrin's uncharacteristical silence. He has been very busy lately because he has taken over well-nigh all of his father's duties. He said Visilya has complained already, and remarked that there was a danger of him turning into "work-obsessed Faramir". I shall have a word with her about this! Although Lord Húrin still attends council and outwardly retains his cheerful and energetic demeanour, I was shocked to see how much he has aged recently. I have not spoken with Túrin yet. You know how he is. He prefers to look on the bright side of things, even to the extend of willfully overlooking dark spots.

Yet some things cannot be overlooked. One reason of my long conference with the King upon my arrival in the City was Elessar's concern for Húrin's health. Apparently he had been to see the healers (without his family's knowledge), who reported to Elessar because they could not help him. It seems even the King himself cannot cure him as the illness is too far advanced. Aragorn was visibly grieved when he told me how he thought it

*unlikely that Túrin's father is going to last until next year. I did not know what to reply, and still I feel as under shock. During council today often I felt myself getting distracted as I watched father and son. Although he conceals it well, I noticed how Húrin seemed to be in pain at times.*

*Obviously he has not revealed the true severity of his state to his family yet, nevertheless I assume Túrin suspects that something is seriously wrong with his father. I agree with Elessar. Húrin should tell his family himself, yet I know him well enough to understand how he does not want to darken their days with bad tidings. Still, I hope there is going to be an opportunity for a quiet word with him tomorrow. I do not want to meddle in their affairs, alas. Yet I think Túrin, his mother and sister should know, lest Húrin's illness advances more swiftly than it looks now, and the family will find itself bereaved ere they have had an opportunity to bid him farewell. I know how painful that is, and I should like to spare my friend the experience if I can.*

*I am deeply grieved myself. During my childhood and adolescence I sometimes envied Túrin for his family, especially when Denethor and I had quarrelled again, or I considered myself treated unfairly by my father. Túrin's parents always made me feel at ease, offering refuge from the coldness of the Steward's house. Maradir and I were treated like members of their large family, and I am still grateful for that. To know that soon this family is going to be disrupted by another bereavement pains me. Húrin is of Imrahil's generation; the illness will force him to depart ere his time. Would there was anything we could do for him!*

*'Tis getting late, and I am tired. Tomorrow is going to be another long day in council. Forgive me if I grieved you with my tidings. I thought you should know. I wish you were here. Your company always cheers me up, and right now I am in sore need of that. I miss the little ones as well. Tell Elboron and Meriadoc and Peregrin they need not worry – I shall continue the story where I left off. Until then you will have to entertain them in the evenings, I fear.*

*Fare you well for now, melda. I shall write again soon to keep you informed about what has passed here.*

*Love,  
Faramir*