

*Dear Éowyn,*

*a happy new year to you and the children! Like you said, it seems strange to regard this date as the beginning of something new, when old grief cast so long and so dark a shadow.*

*Like you, I am in no mood for celebrations – not that there was much of that here anyway. It seems Al-Jahmîr sees nothing significant in the date, perhaps because he believes things were better before the fall of the Dark Lord. Some of his men are of different opinion, however, which accounted for some tension throughout the day. Morale in general does not look very good lately. Not everybody seems to appreciate the remoteness of Barad Gwaelin. I assume for many of the guards the exile was involuntary. They were bound to follow their master because of their oaths, which tore them from families, wives and sweethearts, and left them little hope to return. In a way they are prisoners like me, though not confined here by some cursed poison, but their adherence to duty and honour. I wonder what Al-Jahmîr promised them to motivate and bind them so strongly to himself.*

*Concerning mysterious Azrahil, I found out today that he is Marek's nephew, a son of his infamous half-brother Zohrân. Despite their obvious differences he is the man Al-Jahmîr trusts most, which is why he has become responsible for looking after me. Although we have spent many hours on walks along the beaches and through the hills, he has not spoken more than a few words to me – curt commands, mostly. Whenever I try and address him, to learn a little more about him or Al-Jahmîr, he maintains a stoical silence, or tells me to shut up. On the other hand he is very attentive to everything I do and say. I have a suspicion he even knows about what I did to his uncle's wine, and I wonder why he has not revealed his knowledge to Marek.*

*Al-Jahmîr has still given no indication of what the messenger reported. I have come to assume he brought word from Barahir and friends. Perhaps Marek wanted to win them over to support him, and first they declined out of fear, but now changed their mind, because their greed got the better of them. Which may imply Al-Jahmîr has plans for finally contacting Elessar and the council to commence negotiations. Has still no official word about my fate reached Gondor? Like you said, without our winged messenger the silence would be wellnigh impossible to bear, which surely is part of the Umbarian's plan. 'Tis somewhat comforting to know that in this respect we are a step ahead of him.*

*Another thread of hope has been cut, however. My experiment with the saved water revealed that after about four or five days it loses its questionable virtue. But in this short time, with the water-rations I get at the moment, 'tis impossible for me to save as much as I would need to last a night, or to get me to Forlond. So it all depends on either me or Teherin finding an antidote. I have returned to using up all the water I am provided with, to at least remain free of pain.*

*This, in combination with my daily exercise, has improved my condition considerably. I heard the guards responsible for keeping an eye on me on my walks complain to their captain about having to walk too much and too fast in their heavy armour. I know they dislike "the bloody tark" anyway, and consider watching me a punishment. Were it not for Al-Jahmîr's and Azrahil's explicit orders not to touch me, I doubt I would still be alive. They regard me as a dangerous liability, and secretly fear Gondor's revenge, that much I learned. If it were for them, they would get rid of me as swiftly as possible and return to Umbar. I wonder how long their master is going to be able to control them.*

*The past days (except today when it was rainy) have been very warm and sunny. Were it not for my desperate situation and my longing to return home, I could actually enjoy my stay here. In fact, as strange as it sounds, there are moments when I do. The cliffs around here are of a wild, rugged beauty, looking very much like the coast at Dol Amroth. Every day I am reminded of the wonderful summers I spent there with Boromir and our cousins. I wonder if there are any of the curious sea-shells here we used to dive for as children. Yesterday I sat for*

*about an hour amid flowering gorse to watch a school of dolphins play near the hidden harbour. It actually made me forget about Al-Jahmir and the fact my stay here is not voluntary – until Azrahil demanded we return to the castle.*

*Dusk is coming on, and the oil in the little lamp they left me is almost spent, so I shall end this letter now. Somewhere outside a blackbird is singing, reminding me once more of home. Are they again nesting in the blood-beech we can see from our bedroom-window? If they do, make sure Berúthiel does not find them, although it seems she prefers prowling other things than little birds right now. Tell the children they need not fear the thunderstorms. I recall that as a small boy I was afraid of the lightning, too, until one night when I could not sleep because of it, Boromir told me a story of how the thunder is in fact the sound of Nahar's hooves when the mighty Oromë rides him through the sky, and the lightning are flashes from his horseshoes when he leaps over clouds. It made me forget my fears, and inspired us to play Valar and leap over pillows and blankets until mother came in to remind us of the time, and that we should be sleeping. Ah, I wish I could have been there to tell this story to Elboron and the twins. 'Tis yet another thing I shall have to keep in mind for when I return.*

*Which hopefully shall not be delayed too long. Ah, there goes my light. Fare you well, melda. Know that you are in my thoughts whatever I do.*

*Love always,  
Faramir*