

DAY 3

*** 2 MAY ***

Erchirion

It was remarkably quiet in the tent camp. Since he had left his tent, Erchion had not seen a living soul; except for the soldiers on guard, but they too did not look too lively. Eomer's personal sentry was sleeping, curled up like a baby, in front of the royal pavilion. Erchirion tapped his leg with his boot. 'Stay awake, Falco. Maybe there's one last ork roaming around somewhere who wants revenge on your brand-new king.' The sentry straightened up, rubbing his hair out of his face and the sleep from his eyes. For a moment he looked at Erchirion in surprise, then jumped into position. 'Good morning, Lord. Of course, Lord.' He nodded politely to Erchirion and straightened his back.

It was striking, Erchirion thought, how Falco resembled his sister. Except that he had the slim, sinewy body of a young man while Vera ... Well, Vera was soft. Her hands fit his perfectly, as did her waist. But above and below, she was deliciously soft and round. He closed his eyes at the memory of the night before and smiled, then stepped into a water-filled well and cursed. He shook the water off his boots and continued on his way.

The bell struck ten times as he walked through the city gate. After the festivities of the day before, the city was also remarkably quiet. Here and there, he saw an early bird clearing the remnants of the festivities in the morning sun. The doors of the stables were open. Standing in the doorway was his youngest brother Amrothos, arguing fervently with the stable master. Erchirion remained standing. Amrothos finished his conversation and came over to him.

'Everything OK?' said Erchirion.

Amrothos nodded. 'Heading for the citadel, I suspect?'

'To the Houses of Healing,' Erchirion said.

'Fine too, then I'll walk with you for a while,' Amrothos said. 'I'm on my way to Lothiriel.'

'Lothiriel,' Erchirion said with a short laugh. 'She's quite something! She paired me with one of her new girlfriends yesterday.'

Amrothos looked at his brother curiously. "And?"

'Man!', said Erchirion. Blisteringly, he shook his head. Then he looked at his brother with wide eyes and a broad smile.

Amrothos laughed. 'A speechless Erchirion. That I get to experience that!' He nudged his brother with his elbow. 'She must be very special.'

Erchirion sighed. 'Vera is the sun, the moon and everything in between ... red hair and a smile like a warm spring day, freckles included. She makes me dream of a sunny future. '

'Red hair and freckles, we're not used to that in Dol Amroth,' Amrothos said, wiggling his eyebrows. A few streets away, the brothers said goodbye and Erchirion stepped into the Houses of Healing.

Eowyn

'Vera seems cheerful, but that doesn't necessarily mean she feels that way,' Eowyn said. 'She likes to please others and that's what makes her vulnerable.' She looked at Faramir's cousin inquiringly. Although she was charmed by the fact that he specifically sought her out to consult her about her friend, she remained cautious. They had grown up together, Vera and she. Until Eowyn's parents died and she went to live with her uncle in Edoras. She had not seen Vera again until years later, when she had moved to Edoras as the young wife of Théoden's loyal knight. Eowyn shook her head.

Herudor was well past sixty by then, but Vera had only been seventeen. She was indeed vulnerable, something that old greybeard had cleverly exploited.

'Her husband was old and manipulated her until she had no choice but to agree to marry,' she said. 'I wouldn't want something like that to happen again.'

'I'm not old,' Erchirion said indignantly. 'I am at the peak of my powers and I have no intention of manipulating her in the slightest.' He seated himself on a bench under an apple tree. 'I ...', he shook his head. 'I'm in love,' he said, shrugging his shoulders. 'And as tempting as it is, I promise to woo her properly.'

Eowyn smiled, positioned herself next to him and took his hand. 'I will put in a good word for you,' she said. 'Vera deserves a man who loves her.'

Erchirion smiled at her gratefully.

'But tell me,' she said, 'since you are a cousin of Faramir, is he always so thoughtful and quiet?'

'Faramir?', Erchirion said. 'Faramir is calmness itself.' He thought for a moment. 'And he is indeed thoughtful and sensible. Wooing you is the most impulsive thing I have ever known him to do.'

Eowyn bit her lip.

Vera

Vera knew the sun had been up for a while, but she still postponed the moment she opened her eyes as long as possible. She was not ready for another day yet; she wanted to reminisce about the party. Smiling, she thought back to Lothiriel's cunning little plan to get Vera and Erchirion on the dance floor together. And she smiled even wider when she thought back to the dances that had followed. Despite his poor sense of rhythm, she had enjoyed Erchirion's touches, his strong hands around her waist. She had even enjoyed the awkward collisions while hopping. And then that smell, she groaned, that delicious, spicy scent that surrounded him ... For a moment, she wished it had not stopped at dancing, that he, like Herudor, had taken what he felt was his due. Then, horrified at her own thoughts, she shook her head and gave in to the persistent sunbeam that had slipped past the curtains and shone straight into her face. She opened her eyes and stood up.

An hour later, she walked through the streets to the garden of the Houses of Healing where she hoped to find Eowyn. She felt she would explode if she could not share her happiness with someone. The dance floor in the square was already broken up again; a little further on, a dog was feasting on a pile of vomit. Vera pulled up her nose.

She walked to the garden, opened the gate and remained perplexed. On the bench under the apple tree sat two figures. Two figures she had not expected together. Eowyn was sitting next to Erchirion and they were holding hands. Vera went completely cold. She stepped backwards through the gate again. She felt nauseous and she lowered herself to the ground against the wall. With her head between her legs, she remained seated. How could she have misjudged the situation so much? How could she have even thought that a man like Erchirion, the son of a prince, could feel something for her?

Lothiriel

Lothiriel came out from behind her harp and studied the piece of paper Amrothos tossed to her.

'It's just some impressions of his soldiers,' he said. 'But it should be a song lyric.'

'What kind of song do you want to make?' she said.

'Something cheerful.' Amrothos leaned back with his hands on his neck.

'I can take a look at it later,' she said.

Her brother shot forward. 'Rather now,' he said. 'We want to sing it tonight for his birthday.'

'Now? I promised Mother and Azra to help them in the bathhouse after my harples.' Lothiriel sighed and dropped onto the bench beside Amrothos. 'Cool-blooded, the eye of an eagle, reliable, strong, loyal, fiery, sword and spear,' she read aloud. 'Should it be a hero's song?'

'More or less,' Amrothos said, 'but cheerful and easy to sing along with.'

'What's the tune?'

Amrothos scratched his hair and peered out of the corner of his eye at Salvi's eldest son across the room. Lothiriel looked at her brother with a look full of disbelief. 'In other words, you have nothing yet and you are hoping we will bail you out,' she said. She pushed a violin into her brother's hands and beckoned Salvi's son. 'It looks like we are shifting the harp lessons to tomorrow,' she said. 'Now we need your help for something else.'

An hour later, Salvi's son said goodbye and they had an upbeat tune with shabby lyrics. 'The lyrics really need to be better,' she told her brother. 'This is embarrassing.'

Amrothos shook his head. 'Not at all,' he said. 'It rhymes and, on the contrary, is very easy to sing along.'

'A rock, unwavering and strong,' Lothiriel read. She frowned. 'Powerful and proud, strong as a bull.' Her frown deepened. 'Fiery like a stallion at a gallop.' She started laughing. 'Legs firmly on the ground and loyal as a dog.' She burst out laughing. 'Really, Amrothos,' she said when she was finally out of laughter, 'I hope the birthday boy doesn't attack you angrily with his sword and spear.'

'That won't happen,' her brother said. He pointed to a line in the text, 'because he is keeping his cool.' They looked at each other and both started laughing. 'You're right,' he said and was already bending over his paper again. 'I'll touch up the text some more.'

Outside, the afternoon bells were ringing. 'I'm leaving,' Lothiriel said. 'I can't keep Mother and Azra waiting any longer.' She took her cloak and walked towards the door. 'Out of curiosity, who is this fiery stallion with the cool head anyway,' she asked.

Her farmer looked up from his leaf. 'King Eomer, of course.'

Lothiriel drew big eyes. "In that case," she said, "I would leave the text as it is. She walked back to her brother. 'Or even better, replace these lines with "dancing is his great flaw and don't expect deep conversation either"'. She pointed to some sentences on the sheet.

Amrothos looked at her suspiciously. 'You must not tell him anything,' he said. 'It's one big surprise.'

'Rest assured,' she said, 'Lothiriel keeps her mouth shut because to this bull she is just a cow.' Then she turned and left the room.

This time Amrothos drew big eyes, then he started laughing softly.

Eomer

It was already past noon when Eomer finally left his tent. He had taken time to have a leisurely lunch, then had washed and dressed with care and was now on his way to town. 'It looks to be a beautiful day,' he said to his bodyguard. 'The first day of a new era for Gondor.' And the first day of my twenty-eighth year of life, he added in his mind. Excitedly, he greeted his marshal, who was writing a letter in front of his tent, and he nodded to some soldiers washing their clothes in the river. Falco whistled a catchy tune and Eomer whistled along enthusiastically. Together they walked through the city gate, followed the road up the hill, past the barracks and stables where they had a chat with the stable master.

The bell struck two hours after noon as they walked into the garden of the Houses of Healing where Eomer hoped to find his sister. But to his disappointment, she was neither in the garden, nor in her room. He frowned; it was still too early for his appointment with Aragorn and Imrahil.

'Shall we take the long way, past the city spring,' Falco suggested. 'That way you'll see the city from a different angle and still be at the citadel in plenty of time.'

Eomer nodded and followed his bodyguard through narrow streets and up stairs. For a moment their route followed part of the city wall, then Falco turned into an alley that led deeper and deeper into the city. The rubble had not yet been cleared away everywhere, but the streets were lined with flower boxes, giving the city a homely impression. Here and there, people sat on benches chatting or enjoying the previous day's festivities. Eomer stepped across the canal that carried the water from the city spring above into the city, then ducked under a line full of fresh-smelling laundry and suddenly found himself in a sunny square.

It lay on the south side of the city and overlooked the Pelennor where the river Anduin glistened in the sunlight in the distance. On one side, it was bordered by the city wall against which some stone benches stood, interspersed with troughs of butterfly bushes. The purple flowers hung in clusters over the wall. On the other side stood a single building whose rear façade leaned against Mount Mindolluin.

Eomer stared at the massive mountain that stood in stark contrast to the building's ivy-covered facade. 'This is a beautiful square,' he said. 'Which building is this?'

'The bathhouse,' Falco said from a bench against the city wall. 'I can recommend it. The manager was killed in the battle of the Pelennor, but Prince Imrahil brought his own bath mistress here to keep things running. She is known for her relaxing seaweed baths.'

Eomer put himself next to his bodyguard. 'How do you do it anyway,' he said. 'You've barely been in Minas Tirith for two days and you already know this city better than the inhabitants themselves.'

Falco shrugged his shoulders smiling and closed his eyes for a moment. The sun was shining hard and bright and Eomer too felt his eyes closing.

Lothiriel

'I think you're jumping to conclusions,' Lothiriel said. 'I really can't imagine Erchirion starting anything with his cousin's lover.' She wiped the sweat from her forehead. 'Are you sure they were sitting hand in hand?'

'No doubt about it,' Vera nodded. She helped her friend fold the towels they had taken off the line earlier.

Lothiriel sighed. 'Everything seemed to be going so well at the folk festival,' she said. 'I don't know if I can still do much for you ...' Surprised, she looked through the window at the square. 'Vera, is that King Eomer?'

Vera followed her friend's gaze and nodded. 'And my brother. Good bodyguard he is,' she laughed. 'He's sleeping next to his king.'

'So much for the cool head and galloping stallion,' Lothiriel muttered.

'What is there to see,' asked Biljana who was suddenly standing behind them.

'King Eomer and my brother,' said Vera. 'They are sleeping in the sun.'

Biljana frowned. 'Strange,' she said. 'Imrahil had a consultation with him. What time is it?'

'The bell has just struck three times,' Lothiriel said without averting her gaze from 'the rock in the surf'. Behind her, the door fell shut and a moment later she saw her mother and Vera waking the king and his bodyguard. She heaved a deep sigh and went back to work.

Eomer

Eomer helped clean up the cards they had used. He was satisfied with his consultation with the other princes and suppressed his feeling of disappointment. He did not like much fuss, but it stung him that his soldiers had let their king's birthday go unnoticed. He hoped that at least his sister had thought of him today and wanted to visit the Houses of Healing before returning to camp.

'Before you go I want to show you something,' Aragorn interrupted his thoughts and a moment later the three of them walked towards the main square.

'I hope you understand,' Aragorn said, 'that we take our alliance with Rohan very seriously, not only in wartime, but also in times of peace.'

Eomer nodded.

'For me personally, I would add that, even apart from that alliance, your friendship means a lot to me,' Aragorn said next. 'And apparently,' he said as they walked into the square, 'I am not the only one who feels that way.' At that moment, loud cheers erupted. People were whistling, clapping their hands and stamping their feet. The square was packed, not only with his own soldiers, but also with residents of the city.

Eomer felt completely overwhelmed and stood silently watching it. He blinked his eyes, hoping no one would notice how deeply it affected him.

'Happy birthday, my friend,' grinned Aragorn.

At the edge of the square, a group of musicians set a song whose chorus was sung along by the entire crowd.

*Hey Ho, King Eomer,
Our hero in action!
Eyes like an eagle,
strong as a bear.
Hey Ho, King Eomer,
Our hero in action!
Legs firmly on the ground.
And loyal as a dog.*

*Hey Ho, King Eomer,
Our hero in action!
Fiery like a stallion
and skillful with his spear.
Hey Ho, King Eomer,
Our hero in action!
Sing a song and pour him beer,
grant the king his pleasure.*

Eomer blinked away his tears, completely unaware of the fact that only a dozen metres away, someone was laughing so hard she could barely sing.

'Your king Eomer,' Lothiriel said as she patted Vera on the shoulder. 'may be a gland, but he clearly appreciates a joke.'

Falco smelled his friend even before he saw him. Unobtrusively, he sniffed the by now so familiar scent. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

'Man, you did good.'

Falco's shoulder tingled. He looked back. His eyes hooked for a moment in the blue-grey behind him. His friend was surrounded by other partygoers; residents of Minas Tirith, soldiers from Gondor, as well as some friends from Rohan.

'How did you manage to keep King Eomer away all day,' one of them asked.

'I showed him the whole city and then we fell asleep in the sun,' Falco said. Diagonally behind him, a man clamped his jaws together. But his friends laughed and Falco laughed along.

Vera

After the singing moment in the main square, most of the townspeople returned home.

But Rohan's soldiers lingered, eager for the ale Aragorn and Imrahil had given their friend as a gift. Vera had followed Lothiriel back to the bathhouse where they welcomed another set of late bathers. It was a balmy evening and they had opened the doors and shutters to let the humid, warm air escape. Meanwhile, the party in the square continued and laughter and, at times, singing permeated the bathhouse. With the sun going down, the last bathers had disappeared, the fireplaces were extinguished, the tubs scrubbed and Vera and Lothiriel returned tired and sweaty to their guest rooms, close to the citadel.

Because of the rubble, their route ran through the large square where Eomer, accompanied by his friends and loyal knights, was still celebrating. The innkeeper had put his tables and chairs outside and lit a fire pit.

'Sounds like the men have had quite a few beers already,' Vera said smiling as they walked down the steps to the square in the dusk. Humming, she hooked her arm through Lothiriel's and together they walked into the square. It looked cosy, with that hive.

As they approached the group of men, they caught snippets of their conversations.

'... and she became as wild as a mûmakil,' said one of the soldiers. 'She screamed that she didn't want to be left alone.'

'Your wife was always wild,' another soldier caught up with him as he threw a large block of wood into the hive. The fire flared up.

'You should have tamed her from the start,' someone said laughingly. The two women looked at each other; it was King Eomer's voice. 'Your horse listens better than your wife,' he said.

Vera felt Lothiriel tighten and she seemed to growl. Accelerating her stride, she pulled Vera along with her. They were halfway to the square when some men started singing and were soon joined by the whole group. It was the birthday song they had sung earlier with the whole town ... and yet not at all.

*Hey Ho, King Eomer,
Our hero in action!
Fiery like a stallion
and skillful with his spear.
Hey Ho, King Eomer,
Our hero in action!
Handsome and blonde and very healthy
Lady, kiss him on the mouth.*

'They changed the lyrics,' Vera said giggling. 'We have to kiss it.'

Lothiriel frowned. 'Not at all! Ignore it,' she said as she stepped on with clenched jaws. But the men did not give up and sang their song again.

'Come, Vera,' cried her brother. 'Give your new king a kiss!'

'Lady Vera, a kiss,' cried the other men now too.

Vera giggled and remained standing. She looked at Lothiriel's impatient gaze. 'It's just a kiss,' she said. 'A kiss for my king and then they will leave us alone.'

'Keep ignoring it,' Lothiriel said sternly. 'They have the right ... not ...'

Vera was already gone. She walked up to King Eomer, kissed him and walked back to her friend amidst loud cheers.

'Why do you always give men their way?' said Lothiriel angrily. She snaked Vera down the square after her. Only two streets away did she loosen her grip. 'This is exactly why such an old creep like Herudor got you in his clutches,' she snapped at Vera.

Vera did not understand why her friend was so angry and started crying. Lothiriel looked at her in surprise and then pulled her into her arms. Only after a long time did they let go of each other.

'If you want a man who treats you well, you will have to grow more hair on your teeth,' Lothiriel said as she rubbed the tears from Vera's cheeks as if she were a child. 'You are just too kind to them.'

Erchirion

Erchirion had been thinking about Vera all day. He had been looking for her after his conversation with Eowyn, but she seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. And then suddenly there she was, along with his sister. He only saw them when they were already halfway to the square and the men were singing their song. That awful song where they tried to persuade women to kiss their birthday king. At first, it had been funny and the few women who ventured into the square had reacted happily and smiled good-naturedly. But as the beer flowed, the atmosphere began to turn and the typical big talk surfaced.

He saw how Lothiriel quickened her stride and pulled Vera with her. But he also saw how Vera hesitated as soon as her brother called her. With bated breath, he watched as she walked smiling towards Eomer and kissed him full on the mouth. He closed his eyes and sighed. It was terrible that Eomer was putting up with it all. Erchirion opened his eyes just in time to see the two women rolling down the square.

'Lady Vera kisses delightfully,' said Eomer, 'yet it was not the kiss I was hoping for.'

Erchirion looked at him coldly. 'Not everyone is conquered by the sword, Eomer.' He stood straight. 'I think enough is enough. It's time to return to camp.' Ignoring the disappointment in Eomer's eyes, he started urging the others to leave.

Falco

Under the ringing of the curfew, the procession of soldiers moved through the city. They talked, laughed and some were still singing Eomer's birthday song. Given the elated mood of the group, Erchirion had arranged for the captains to see to it that all the soldiers left the city. Falco's watch was now over and he left the protection of his king to Eolif who was now walking in front with Eomer. With his eyes he searched for his friend but he was nowhere to be seen. And then he smelled it

again, that delicious mixture of scents that belonged to his friend. Unconsciously, his fingers slid over his lips. He felt a hand grab his elbow and gently lead him away from the group, pushing him into a dark and deserted alley. There, in absolute darkness, barely twenty metres from the passing procession, he was pushed against the wall and kissed. 'What kept you anyway,' Falco groaned.

By Ella Smidts 2024

Translated from Dutch by DeepL