

# Eight sunny days

## What preceded

*After a bloody battle, the army commanders of Gondor and Rohan together had defeated the dark lord Sauron and his army of orcs and eastern allies.*

*Théoden, the king of Rohan, had been killed in battle and had passed the torch to his nephew Eomer before his death.*

*Aragorn was the last descendant of the old line of the kings of Gondor. He had assumed leadership of the Western armies and he too would soon assume kingship. While the victorious army stayed temporarily in a tent camp on the eastern border of the land, the capital of Gondor was preparing for a long-awaited coronation.*

## Eowyn

Faramir, steward of Gondor, hurried through the streets to the lower parts of Minas Tirith. As he descended further, the houses were more damaged and the streets more littered with debris. Here and there, residents were throwing rubble into piles, then carried off in baskets by horse and cart. In the streets where the debris had already been cleared, the first repairs were made. They were only temporary repairs, meant to keep out the cold, rain and sunlight. And sunlight was plentiful these days. Now that the enemy had been vanquished, it seemed that not only his physical presence but also his shadow had disappeared.

After the long, bloody winter, the spring sun shone brighter and warmer than ever. Even on this early morning, it lured the residents of Minas Tirith outside. Despite being accosted from time to time, Faramir put in a brisk pace. He had just received a message and he was impatient to share it with the woman he hoped to marry.

Despite her smooth recovery, Lady Eowyn still resided in the Houses of Healing. Faramir found her in the walled garden where, as often, she stood looking out over the fields of the Pelennor at the foot of the city. He stood beside her and took her hand.

'I have good news,' he said. 'Aragorn's coronation will take place on the first day of May.'

Eowyn looked at her lover. 'Forgive me,' she said, 'but since I was brought in here injured, I have lost count of the days. What day is today?'

'Ten April,' Faramir said.

'And will the forces remain in Itilien all this time?' she asked, turning eastwards.

'I think so,' Faramir said. 'I don't expect them back until the coronation.' He looked at Eowyn.

'They are taking time to mourn their losses and honour their heroes. And you are one of them. Do you now regret not joining them when your brother asked?'

Eowyn shook her head. 'It is only unfortunate that I have so little to do here. I wish I could help clean up and restore the city, or assist my own people, for they too have suffered much loss.'

'There is so much work yet to be done that there will be enough left for after your recovery,' Faramir said.

'I have already recovered,' Eowyn said decidedly. 'Are there no tasks I can perform then?'

'I am soon expecting my niece Lothiriel and her mother,' Faramir said. 'Perhaps you can take up tasks together.'

'Your niece?' she said. 'What am I going to do with a child?' she sighed. 'But oh well, anything is better than this waiting and doing nothing.' She looked at Faramir. 'I took the liberty of inviting Lady Vera, the widow of one of King Théoden's knights. She has been my companion since the death of her husband.'

Faramir smiled sparingly. 'We are not used to so many noble ladies in Minas Tirith. I hope our city, now that it is so damaged, will live up to their expectations.'

## **Lothiriel**

From the roof of the citadel, Lothiriel watched the bay where it was a coming and going of sloops between the port and the ship that would take her and her mother to the capital of Gondor. Apart from the sloops, the bay was quiet, very different from a few weeks ago when an enemy fleet had appeared one morning. With a sigh, she turned and just saw Azra, the lifeguardess, crossing the square towards the harbour. Lothiriel ran down the stairs and followed her, criss-crossing the city streets, over the cleanly polished mosaics in front of the bathhouse and past the baker who had been baking bread since a week back. It still amazed her how quickly the residents of Dol Amroth picked up normal life again. She herself found it anything but natural. For even though they had defeated the enemy, their losses were great. And deep down, Lothiriel was convinced that a more experienced leader would have made better decisions that would have resulted in fewer casualties.

In the harbour, she found her brother Elphir, who had grain, wine, lemons, oranges, dried fruits and nuts brought to the big ship by order of their father. Tents, blankets and cooking utensils were also brought on board. Since he had returned from the battlefield, he had resumed command of their city. Lothiriel was not mournful.

Lord Salvi, Lothiriel's harp teacher, walked into the harbour, followed by his sons. With rising amazement, Lothiriel helped them load harps, drums and fiddles into a sloop.

'Are you sure we won the war,' she asked her brother. 'Father is emptying the whole city. It looks like he is trying to bribe the enemy as yet.'

Elphir smiled. 'You are not the only one who has put up a tough fight,' he said. 'The men at the front are also entitled to rest and relaxation ... and some well-deserved revelry.' He put his arm around her shoulder. 'Don't be so worried and try to enjoy yourself,' he said. 'You might find a handsome bachelor in Minas Tirith who knows how to charm your heart.'

'I hope not.' Lothiriel looked at her brother indignantly. 'Father promised me that if I managed to successfully defend Dol Amroth, he would leave the choice of a husband to me,' she said. 'What he doesn't know is that I have no intention of marrying at all.' Elphir frowned. 'I have no desire to submit to the wishes and whims of a man,' she said in disgust, 'or to bear child after child.' She shook her head. 'I will start an orange plantation just like Erchirion and live according to the rhythm of the seasons.' She smiled at the thought.

Elphir's frown only deepened. 'You are the daughter of a prince, Lothiriel. You can dream all you want, but at the end of the day, you have a role to play.'

Lothiriel stuck out her tongue. 'Then I will become a lifeguard,' she said. 'There is no nobler profession in Dol Amroth than that of lifeguard.' With one last angry glance at her brother, she walked over to Azra who was lugging baskets of dried seaweed.

'Does this have to come along too,' Lothiriel asked in surprise as she held out a hand.

'Orders from your father,' Azra said. She wiped the sweat from her forehead. 'He wants to pamper his soldiers with seaweed baths and foot massages.'

'Surely not all his soldiers,' Lothiriel said with a look full of disbelief.

'I should hope not,' Azra said. 'In that case, I will desperately need your help. At least if your arm allows it. How is your wound?'

Lothiriel looked at the sling around her elbow and shrugged. 'Good, I think. The pain is gone, it just needs to heal further.'

'Good,' Azra said. 'Then you can help me roll a washtub up to the port.'

## **Vera**

Vera looked at the list Eowyn had sent her and checked that everything was in the suitcase. Dresses, shirts, stockings and a cloak, all freshly washed and neatly folded. She added an extra pair of shoes and a linen bag of toiletries. Then she closed Eowyn's suitcase and sat on top and waited.

She looked at her hands that lay folded on her lap and frowned. The fresh earth on Herudor's grave had already become quite overgrown with weeds in a short time. And after weeding, despite scrubbing hard, she still hadn't gotten her fingernails clean.

She should feel more grief over his passing, Vera thought. But mostly she felt gratitude. She was grateful to the old man for taking her and her brother into his home after the death of their father. She was grateful to him for providing her brother with a horse and proper equipment and for appealing to the royal family to get his military career off the ground. She was less grateful to him for taking for granted her presence in his bed. Although he had eventually settled it nicely by marrying her ...

She shook her head and let go of the memory. Her marriage was behind her, the war had been won and Lady Eowyn had invited her to Minas Tirith. Minas Tirith! It was said that the capital of Gondor was the most beautiful in all of middle Earth. Vera smiled and spontaneously put on a song. When a moment later there was a knock on the door and they helped her and the luggage onto the cart, she was still singing.

## **Lothiriel**

As soon as the ship docked in Minas Tirith harbour, it became clear that the war had done a lot of damage here. The port building lay in ruins and the road behind the remains of the port building had once been a shady avenue lined with fruit trees. Now it was a bare path in a barren plain full of pits, with freshly heaped mounds along either side. Grave mounds, Lothiriel suspected. The screams of the gulls were accompanied by a violent buzzing of insects that swarmed in large numbers around a pile of meat that lay rotting a little way away. The

pungent, woeful smell of the carcass made Lothiriel gag. Judging by the size of the protruding ribs, it must have been a gigantic beast. Lothiriel, her mother and Azra stood silently looking at it.

'A mûmakil,' said one of the dock workers as he piled up their luggage. 'They are too big to bury, so we let them rot.'

'How do you defeat such a colossal beast,' said Biljana, Lothiriel's mother, dismayed.

'With good luck and the help of the Rohirrim,' the man said.

The women looked at him questioningly. 'The horse masters from Rohan,' he said. 'Never was the sound of horns more welcome than that of the Rohirrim on the morning of the great battle.'

Lothiriel realised that the attack on Dol Amroth was nothing compared to the storm the enemy had created here.

'My poor Imrahil, my poor sons,' Biljana said. 'What a blood-curdling battle must have been fought here.'

Meanwhile, their luggage had been loaded onto a cart and they were just about ready to leave when a cloud of dust came in their direction. Two horsemen approached the port at great speed and a moment later their cousin Faramir greeted them with a broad smile.

'Welcome, welcome!' he said. 'I am really happy to see you. Though I fear your stay may be a little less comfortable this time.' Then he looked at his niece with a puzzled expression.

'Lothiriel?' he said. She nodded.

'So this is your cousin Lothiriel,' said the lady he had brought along. She was young and beautiful and sat straddling a chestnut-coloured horse whose mane matched the colour of her hair. 'I got the impression that your niece was just a child.'

'I was barely more than a child the last time my cousin saw me,' Lothiriel laughed. 'Maybe he forgot that little girls grow up.'

Faramir smiled. 'Forgive me,' he said. 'Lady Eowyn is the sister of King Eomer from Rohan. She was wounded in battle and is staying in the Houses of Healing.'

'Injured?', Biljana said in surprise. 'Dear child, don't tell me you took part in the atrocities that took place here.'

'Mother,' said Lothiriel indignantly, 'have you forgotten that we too have taken up the sword to defeat our enemy? In a war like this, only a fool remains unmoved to watch.' She turned to Eowyn. 'I understand that we owe much to the horsemen of Rohan and I like to hear how a lady ends up in battle so far from home.'

Eowyn smiled. 'The stories will have to wait a little longer,' she said. 'Later we first make sure you get into the city safely. The wells and canals are treacherous.'

'I wonder if there is something going on between our cousin and this fair lady,' Biljana said as, seated on the cart, they rode after the two riders.

'He would be foolish not to court her,' Lothiriel said as she studied them. 'She is beautiful.' At that moment, the two riders grabbed each other's hands and the women on the cart smiled approvingly.

**Vera**

Vera was dozing on the cart. They had been on the road for over a week and she was tired of travelling. Since they had left Edoras, the home of the kings of Rohan, behind, she had seen much misery. Burnt-out farms, ruined villages, cattle and horses lay butchered in the meadows. Here and there, however, rebuilding had already begun and in the East Fold, fields had already been sown and horse herders had already brought their depleted herds back to the steppes of East Emnet.

Meanwhile, they had left Rohan behind for several days and the more they approached the capital of Gondor, the more the terrain had been broken up by Rohan's horsemen who had ridden past here weeks ago.

Shortly before sunset, they finally drove onto the fields of the Pelennor, at the foot of the beautiful, white city. Although, beautiful? Even from miles away, it was clear to Vera that the war had destroyed much and that there was still work to be done here before they could start sowing. The pits and corridors the orcs had dug across the fields had to be filled in, carcasses of fallen horses had to be buried and remnants of war gear removed. Nevertheless, she had to admit that, even in this battered state, the capital of Gondor was awe-inspiring. It shone like a pale work of art in the setting sun. As the sun disappeared further behind the mountains, Vera rattled through the battered city gate on the cart.

## **Erchirion**

On 15 April, exactly a month after the great battle on the Pelennor and twenty days after the final victory at the Morannon, Erchirion sat in front of his tent in Cormallen's camp reading a letter. It had been delivered to him by his father's bodyguard, who in turn had received it from the captain of the supply ship that sailed weekly back and forth between the capital and the army camp. The letter had been written the day before by Erchirion's sister and, besides an account of the defence of Dol Amroth, contained some news about the situation in Minas Tirith. After reading the letter, Erchirion sought out his father, Prince Imrahil, to consult him about one piece of news in particular. He met him halfway between both their tents, as the prince had received a similar letter from his wife and wanted to speak to his son about, coincidentally or not, that same piece of news.

'Do you think he is aware?' his father asked.

'I doubt it,' Erchirion said. 'But it's not up to us to tell him.'

His father shook his head. 'No, he has to hear it from her herself.' He pulled a dubious face.

'And I suspect she won't tell him until after the coronation.'

Erchirion frowned his head and pursed his lips. 'I could suggest it to him,' he finally said. 'Along my nose. During a friendly conversation.'

His father reflected. 'That's all we can do,' he said. 'But it must remain a suggestion, no more than that. Invite him for a cup of wine by the fire tonight.'

And so it came about that on the evening of 15 April, Erchirion and his friend Eomer were having a pleasant conversation by a campfire.

## Falco

Some distance away, Falco sat on a block of wood in front of the royal pavilion. King Eomer had been gone for some time, and although he was supposed to stay at his post, there was little to guard. Occasionally he would doze off and dream of his beloved's beautiful smile, and think of the lips and hands that had set him on fire for weeks now.

'Has he left already?', a voice suddenly sounded close to his ear. 'Are you alone?'

Startled, Falco turned around. 'Man, you're so quiet you could have slit my throat before I noticed anything.'

'That's not what I had in mind,' his friend said, laughing. Falco grabbed his face between his hands and kissed the lips he had just dreamed about.

'King Eomer is gone,' he said when they finally let go of each other.

His friend grinned. 'And he will stay away for a while. I diluted Erchirion's wine with brandy.'

Falco laughed. 'You are my hero!' He grabbed his friend by the hand. 'Ever made love in a royal bed?' His friend drew big eyes. 'Come,' Falco said and pulled him into the tent.

## Erchirion

'I received word today that my sister has arrived in Minas Tirith,' Erchirion said as he filled two cups with the wine his father had sent for. 'And even though she is a pain in the ass sometimes, I can't wait to see her again.'

'I understand what you mean,' Eomer said. 'Sisters are both a curse and a blessing.' The two men toasted and took a sip.

'Sweet and soft as a kitten, but with sharp nails,' Erchirion laughed. 'By the way, have you heard from Eowyn?'

Eomer shook his head worriedly. 'I hope she makes friends in town. Or that she gets her friend Vera to come from Edoras.'

'If the women of Rohan are all as beautiful as your sister, I hope she lets all her friends come,' Erchirion laughed. 'Now that the war is over, I finally have time to look for a wife.'

'Why would you do that,' Eomer said baffled. 'A wife gives a lot of hassle,' he drained his cup, 'and extra responsibilities. And I already have enough of those.' He pushed his cup in Erchirion's direction so it could be refilled.

'In Dol Amroth, it is said that a good woman actually brings peace to the house.' Erchirion refilled the cups. 'That is certainly the case with my parents. My mother is a rock. A quiet force, both for my father and for us.' He looked at his friend. 'I will be happy if I ever find a woman like her ... or like my sister. The man who marries her may kiss his hands.'

Eomer nodded. 'The man Eowyn wants to marry will have to prove himself. My heart broke when I found her on the battlefield. I thought she was dead. All I wished for at that moment was to die like her in battle.' He frowned at the memory and took a big gulp. 'I knew she dreamed of following Aragorn into battle.' He stared ahead for a moment. 'But I never expected her to go against my advice and the king's wish.'

'Sisters are quirky,' Erchirion nodded.

Eomer shook his head pityingly. 'I've been trying to protect her all my life ...' He drained his cup and pushed it back into Erchirion's hands. 'This,' he said, 'is good wine.'

Erchirion sniffed the decanter. 'I think he is stronger than usual.' He poured the cups full again. 'Eowyn is brave and strong,' Erchirion said after a while. He thought of his own sister. 'Maybe we want to protect our sisters too much and they are stronger than we think ... Maybe they are even stronger than we would like.' He squeezed his eyes to slits as he thought about this. 'We protect them not because they are weak, but because they are important to us,' Eomer said.

'And because it makes us feel strong ... and useful,' Erchirion said in a voice that unexpectedly skipped. 'Perhaps, along with our mothers, they are the main reason we go to war.'

He looked into the almost empty decanter. 'This wine is really stronger than usual.' He tried to divide the remaining wine between both cups without spilling. The two men stared silently ahead for a while and Erchirion suddenly remembered the purpose of this conversation. 'Oh well, what does it matter, eventually we will have to let them go anyway,' he said.

Eomer drank from his cup and then looked at him with a lodder's eye. 'If we have to let them go, what's left for us to do after they leave the house?'

Erchirion pondered. 'Get married,' he said. 'And make sisters for our sons.' He grinned.

'You're really determined to take a wife,' Eomer said, grinning back.

Erchirion nodded. 'And I advise you to do the same. You need a woman to support you and take care of your skin-houses ... household when Eowyn ...,' he resumed, 'sooner or later decides to leave your home.'

'I hope she stays with me for a long time. Besides, I'll never find a woman to match her,' Eomer said as he exaggeratedly opened his eyes, which suddenly seemed very heavy.

'That's a plobreem ... problem,' Erchirion nodded.

At this, Eomer thought for a long time. 'Our sisters spoiled us,' he finally said. 'They messed us up for life.'

Erchirion raised his finger. 'There is only one solution. I marry your sister and you marry mine.'

Eomer looked at him thoughtfully. 'Agreed,' he said.

'Then I hope you are not in a hurry,' Erchirion said as he watched in amazement as his friend slowly slid off his stool. He pointed with his thumb and forefinger. 'Because my sister is still small.'

Eomer, meanwhile, had sunk completely to the ground. 'Plenty of time,' he said, slapping his hand as if to scare away a fly.

Erchirion looked at his sleeping friend feeling that the conversation had not quite gone according to plan. Then he shrugged, dropped down beside his friend and closed his eyes as well.

## **Vera**

'I think we should throw it wide,' Lothiriel said.

Eowyn pursed her lips. 'I think we should sow in rows and cover the seeds with a layer of soil.'

Vera threw up a handful of seed and with the back of her hand tried to recapture as much of it as possible. Since she had arrived a week ago, they had already done a lot of work. Because

of the nice weather, they had mostly worked outside, in the fields of the Pelennor, where the farmers were short of hands as spring progressed. It was already too late in the year to sow spring wheat, but the weather was ideal for sowing barley.

Lothiriel squeezed her eyes to slits and looked at Eowyn suspiciously. 'Your method seems like a lot of work.'

'Your method seems like a measure of nothing,' Eowyn said. 'As soon as we spread the seed, the birds are gone with it.'

Lothiriel's gaze wandered to the crows watching patiently from a burnt-out barn. She sighed. 'Fine, we'll do it your way.'

Eowyn nodded, took the hoes, gave one to Lothiriel and a bag of seeds to Vera. 'I draw a line, Vera throws in a seed at regular intervals and Lothiriel, you follow us and throw the line again. Not too much soil, the seeds must be allowed to germinate.' She looked at Vera. 'One seed at a time, not like just now.'

Vera smiled. 'I love it when you boss me around. How I have missed that for the past few weeks.'

'It's obviously not the first time you've done this,' Lothiriel said after the first row.

'As a child, we were allowed to help farmers at sowing and harvesting time,' Eowyn said. 'I loved being outside with Eomer.' She smiled. 'At the end of one such day, he would put me on his shoulders for a show off.' Lothiriel pulled a questioning look. 'A tour around the farm to show everyone how proud he was of me,' Eowyn clarified.

'Why did the king of Rohan himself help sow?' said Lothiriel.

'Who could have foreseen then that Eomer would one day become king,' Eowyn said as she returned to work. 'King Théoden was still healthy and our nephew would succeed him.' After a while, she turned again. 'According to Faramir, the army is preparing for their return. He expects them here within a few days.'

'You're just saying that now,' Vera said. 'Just yesterday I wrote a letter to my brother. If I had known, I would have used my paper for a better purpose.'

The other two women looked at her questioningly. Vera shrugged. 'Any goal is better, he never writes back anyway.'

'Eomer sometimes ignores my messages too, or he limits his replies to one or two sentences,' Eowyn said with a sigh. 'And he always writes in the imperative mode; do this, do that ...'

'Clearly a family trait,' laughed Vera. 'Did you write to your brothers, Lothiriel?'

'I always write,' Lothiriel said, 'though the length of the letter depends on the person I am writing to. I love writing.' She neatly shovelled some earth into the line. 'And I also love getting letters.' She stopped and looked across the fields to the east. 'But right now I particularly long to see my brothers in the flesh.'

Vera saw a look of sadness cross Lothiriel's face. 'Has your family suffered many losses,' she asked.

'My uncle and my grandmother,' Lothiriel said. 'They died in the battle of Dol Amroth.' She smiled sadly. 'And you?'

'Only my husband,' Vera said, 'at the first battle of the Isen, months ago. He fought alongside Théodred, the king's son.'

'Ladies,' said Eowyn, 'if we stand here all the time talking, the field won't get sown.'



The sun was already setting when the three of them looked at their work with satisfaction. 'Neat,' Eowyn said with a satisfied look. 'Our small contribution to next winter's beer,' Vera said as she wrapped an arm around her two friends. 'Really,' said Lothiriel. 'Did we do all that work for beer?' 'Possibly,' Eowyn said. 'And not insignificant if we want to keep the men happy,' Vera said. She had thought about Lothiriel's words while working and she had come to the realisation that, having lost her husband, her brother was her only surviving relative. It was time, she felt, to rekindle that family bond.

*By Ella Smidts 2024  
translated from Dutch by DeepL*