

DAY 1

*** 30 APRIL ***

Eowyn

When the day came when the army came from the east, crossed the river and set up their tents just outside the city, the streets and city walls filled with people all eager to catch a glimpse of their future king. For thousands of years, Gondor had been ruled by stewards and people feared the royal line had died out, yet the hope remained that one day a king would stand up and accept his crown. But despite the curiosity of his subjects, Aragorn did not show himself for the time being. As the day progressed, the rows of tents grew into a camp with the royal pavilions of Aragorn, Eomer and Prince Imrahil in the middle.

Under the late afternoon sun, of yet another warm spring day, Eowyn stood at the edge of the garden of the Houses of Healing and saw their flags and banners flapping gently in the wind. Lothiriel had been summoned by her father and was travelling with her mother, their friend Azra and Vera. They had asked Eowyn along, but she had refused.

She found it painful to admit, but she was dreading the confrontation with her brother. She had wronged him by travelling to the front against his will and taking part in the battle, and then again by disobeying his wish to unite with the victors. Was he not entitled to her support, now that he himself had to take up the kingship so unexpectedly? Was he not entitled to her love?

Gently, she shook her head. She was not looking forward to the day ahead of her.

Lothiriel

The tented camp on the Pelennor was immense. From the ramparts it looked like a neatly organised anthill, but as soon as they left the battered city gate behind, the vastness of the camp really dawned on the women. The first mile after the gate had been left clear, but only a hundred metres or so after the roads to the south and north split off, they were already driving past the first rows of tents. This was the part of the Pelennor that had suffered most from the war. The debris had not yet all been removed and the pits and trenches the orcs had dug had not yet all been filled in. But it was far enough from the rotting carcasses of the mûmakils and close enough to the city to ensure a smooth supply of food. It was in the wake of a cart of food that the women drove into the camp at walking pace.

'This morning's rain has washed the road clean,' Azra said with a satisfied sigh.

'And the wells filled with water,' laughed Biljana.

'How are you going to find your brother back in a camp the size of a city,' Lothiriel asked Vera who was riding beside her.

Vera bit her lip. 'I suspect the soldiers are classified according to the region they come from,' she said. Lothiriel frowned. 'I can ask my father to send someone with you.'

Vera shook her head. 'I promised not to bother you,' she said, avoiding a deep puddle. 'I can manage.' A little further on, the rows of tents softened back and gave way to a bend in a small river that approached the road about 10 metres before deflecting again and flowing further towards the Anduin river. As they approached the bend, the women heard the singing of men.

'I think I hear the language of Rohan,' Vera said with a smile. She turned her head in the direction of the chanting. 'Yes, it's our language. Those are our men.'

Lothiriel laughed at the pride that was suddenly so evident on her friend's face. As soon as they rounded the bend, they not only heard Rohan's men, they saw them. A whole company of soldiers stood singing as they washed in the river.

The women stopped their horses. 'Knights of Rohan,' Vera called to them, 'where do I find the men of Aldburg?'

'North of the royal pavilion,' someone called to them from under a tree on the bank.

Meanwhile, Lothiriel watched the spectacle of half-dressed and naked men in amazement. Some stood at the edge or merely with their feet in the water, others were robed up to their waists in the river. The men in the water were also amazed. They stopped singing and a few whistled admiringly at the women on the way.

'Lady Vera, join us,' cried one of them. 'And bring your girlfriends too. The water is lovely!' He made no effort to hide his nakedness.

'From the look of your weapons, it is especially cold,' Azra called back. The men laughed.

'Will we see you tomorrow, after the coronation?' another man called out.

'Maybe,' Azra cried as she set her horse back in motion. 'But above all, enjoy your bath. Nothing feels as nice as a clean washed man!'

Lothiriel's mouth fell open. Then she burst out laughing and with one last look at the men, she rode after her mother and Azra.

A moment later, Biljana turned around. 'As entertaining as our meeting with the soldiers was,' she told the two young women, 'it is better not to encourage them. These men have been away from home for a long time and some may have forgotten how to treat a lady. So let us behave like ladies above all and not address or encourage them.' Lothiriel saw Vera biting her lip. They exchanged glances among themselves, straightened their backs and continued on their way with chins raised.

Eomer

The cherry tree was one of the few trees that had survived the battle in the fields of the Pelennor. Unhindered by the past violence of war, its branches bore plenty of leaves and cherries. They were still too green to eat, but the birds were already lurking. Eomer stood in the shade of the tree and looked out over the Pelennor. He had no idea what the plain had looked like before he had ridden up it with King Théoden and six thousand horsemen six weeks ago. By then, the valley was already infested with orcs and marred by their war gear, pits and trenches. Some farms and barns were already back in use, he saw. Other buildings were blackened, only the trusses remained. In the distance were fields, laced with regular furrows, and he hoped that Rohan's farmers, like those here, had already had a chance to sow grain. His people needed food, and houses, but where was he to get the men who could provide all these things? Many men had died, and although Rohan's women could work hard, he could hardly ask them to rebuild their houses themselves.

He heard whistling and was startled out of his thoughts. Something had caught the attention of his men, causing them to suddenly act like adolescents. Surprised, Eomer looked at the horsemen who had approached the river only about ten metres. He smiled. Lady Vera, Lord Herudor's young widow and a friend of his sister, was watching the troops from her horse. And the lords gladly yielded to her critical gaze.

'Knights of Rohan,' she called to them, 'where do I find the men of Aldburg?'

'North of the royal pavilion,' Eomer called from under his tree.

'Lady, join us,' cried Urlof, one of the younger knights. 'And bring your friends. The water is delicious!' He showed his best side and got full attention, both from Vera and the other women. Only then did he see her. Proud, almost regal she sat on her horse and yet there was something in her expression that also gave her something vulnerable. She smiled and for a moment Eomer imagined himself on a sunny spring day on the daisy-decorated lawns of Rohan.

Lothiriel

The deeper they drove into the camp, the closer the tents were together and the greater the activity of the men. They were washing their clothes, polishing their boots, cutting each other's hair and shaving each other's beards. For fear of falling out of character, Lothiriel did not dare make eye contact. Staring straight ahead, she rode past rows of tents and soldiers, and it was only when she approached the royal pavilions that she dared to breathe in and out freely again.

With a sudden sense of pride, she looked at the flags rising above the large tents: in the middle, the flag of Gondor, white with the silhouette of a naked tree, next to it the green flag with the white horse of Rohan and the blue flag with the swan ship of Dol Amroth. Only now did it fully dawn on her that the war was over. The enemy had been defeated by the numerous men who had fought together under these three flags. She thought back to Dol Amroth's attack. Of the violence that had been forced upon her, of the faces of the men whose lives she had ended against her will, of her fear that she did not possess sufficient strength to protect those entrusted to her.

A slight cough snapped her out of her reverie. The other women had descended and her father had approached them unnoticed. He was not alone. Beside him stood two unfamiliar men. One was tall, dark-haired and his face still showed traces of injuries. The other was at least as tall, but old, with a long white beard, white hair and an equally white, immaculate cloak. She rose and bowed.

'My daughter,' Prince Imrahil said and looked at her thoughtfully. 'My daughter,' he said again and put his hand on her shoulder. Lothiriel gulped at this unexpected gesture of appreciation. 'My lord,' she said. 'Dol Amroth is safe. Captain Lothiriel requests leave.'

'You earned that leave,' he said. 'I only expect another report from you. But let me introduce you first.' He gestured to the dark-haired man beside him. 'Aragorn, this is my daughter Lothiriel, captain in the city guard of Dol Amroth.' The man smiled and nodded. 'It is Aragorn who has led us to victory. He will be our new king, King Elessar,' Imrahil said. Lothiriel bowed. 'And this is Mithrandir, though he is also called Gandalf,' her father said, gesturing to the old man.

Again, Lothiriel bowed. 'My brother Elphir told me about you,' she said. 'It is an honour to meet you.' She let the gentlemen lead her to the royal tent where they were joined by her mother and Azra moments later.

Vera

Since she had said goodbye to the other women, she had already passed three rows of tents. Rows that seemed to have no end in sight. There were just too many tents north of the royal pavilion. Eowyn had been right, looking for her brother was like looking for a four-leaf clover on the grassy plains of East Emnet. Meanwhile, she had been accosted, whistled at, and once a group of soldiers had even blocked her way. And although they had laughed and joked, Vera felt increasingly uncomfortable. She turned into another queue. 'Excuse me, I'm looking for the soldiers from Aldburg,' she said to the first soldier she met.

'Aldburg?' his gaze made her pull her cloak further. 'Aldburg's men are further back.'

Vera nodded and walked on quickly. Halfway down the queue, Rohan's white-green tents gave way to blue-grey ones and she wondered if she was still walking in the right direction. A little further on, her path was blocked by a cart of dented and damaged chest armour. Some were covered in dark stains. Dried blood, she suspected. After her husband had fallen, his armour had been sent home. Vera had spent days brushing the dried blood off his armour in vain; it looked like orc blood had eaten into the metal. Lost in thought, she walked between two tents to the next row, missed a ditch and landed on hands and knees in the wet grass. She cursed. Not only was she hopelessly lost in this labyrinth, now she was wet and dirty. Suddenly she missed Herudor. He may have been old, unimaginative and overly fond of his routine, but he had also brought her peace and stability, she realised. Weeping, she remained seated. After a while, she straightened her shoulders and crawled on hands and knees under the wind ropes between some tents ... until she bumped into a pair of boots. She looked up. The trousers tucked into the boots did not belong to the uniform of a Rohan soldier. From under the top edge of the trousers, dark hairs crept up in a row and fanned out over a bare chest. A muscular bare chest. She swallowed. The soldier's face was tanned, as if he spent a lot of time outdoors. He looked at her with a puzzled smile.

'Good afternoon,' he said. 'Where did you come from so suddenly?' Frowning, he cast a glance over Vera's head as if checking she wasn't being chased. 'Are you all right?'

She nodded and quickly wiped away her tears. Too late, she realised that her face was now covered in mud wipes. The man smiled and held out his hand to her.

Vera thought of the men who had addressed her earlier and hesitated. 'I am looking for my brother, but I am lost,' she said.

'Then I'll help you search,' he said.

She swallowed, grabbed his hand and allowed herself to be pulled up. When she wiped her hands on her cloak, he shook his head pityingly and pointed to the bucket of water behind him. 'Wash with this,' he said, 'I'm done anyway.' He heaped his shirt lying in the grass and put it on.

Vera washed her hands and her face. When she finished, the chest and hair were neatly tucked away under his shirt. With a regretful sigh, she looked at him. He handed her a towel and she dried her face. His scent hung in his towel, exciting and at the same time strangely familiar. Vera closed her eyes and sniffed.

All the while, he stood watching her, with a smile and eyes that twinkled as if he had a little secret he was struggling to keep to himself.

'Are you ready,' he said when she finally handed him back his towel. She nodded. 'Let's go in search of your brother.' Again he reached out to her. This time she did not hesitate.

They were already walking through another row of tents, Vera and the man called Erchirion. They walked hand in hand, something Vera had never done before. Even with Herudor, she had never walked hand in hand. It felt exciting and safe at the same time, Vera thought. Unlike just now, she had not been accosted once in his presence.

'So your brother is from Aldburg,' he said as they walked through another row of tents.

Vera nodded. 'But I don't know under whom he serves now. Lord Eomer, perhaps.'

'King Eomer you mean?'

Vera nodded resignedly. 'King Eomer. I'm not used to it yet; that King Théoden has been killed.'

'Did you know him personally?'

Vera bit her lip. 'My husband was one of his knights.'

Erchirion looked at her in surprise. 'Your husband ...'

Vera felt him loosen his grip and clamped her hand around his. 'He fell, months ago,' she said quickly. 'He was ... our marriage was ... not ...' She looked at Erchirion uneasily. 'Practical,' she finally said. 'Our marriage was practical.'

Erchirion squeezed her hand for a moment and then released it. 'I'm sorry,' he said compassionately, 'that you lost your ... practical husband, but now let's find your brother first.

What is his name?'

'Falco,' Vera said, turning her face away from him to hide her disappointment. 'My brother's name is Falco.'

With his index finger, Erchirion lifted her chin so she could look him straight in the eye. 'Then I have good news for you, Lady Vera from Rohan. I know exactly where we can find your brother.'

Falco

Behind the pavilion, Falco had started his duties for the king after a bath and shave. He sat on a stool polishing the royal boots. Against his will, his gaze kept slipping to his friend who was having his hair cut just two tents away. Finally, he stood up and walked over, seemingly bored. He tapped his boot gently against the sole of his friend's boot. 'Neatly trimmed, I see.'

'And you neatly shaved,' his friend said with a broad smile.

Falco looked into his sparkling grey-blue eyes and sighed.

'Tomorrow is a big day,' his friend said as he too stood up, thanked the barber and walked with Falco to the royal pavilion.

'Tonight?', Falco asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

'Too dangerous.'

Some soldiers walked by and the two men waited a moment before speaking further. 'Minas Tirith has many hidden corners,' his friend said softly. 'Maybe we can find ...' He broke off his sentence and nodded politely to the soldiers passing them. 'This war is too crowded,' he sighed. 'Falco, this can never ...'

'No,' Falco said decidedly. 'I don't want to hear it. We'll find a way.' He looked at his friend with determination. 'We'll find a way to be together.'

His friend pointed desperately at the soldiers who had gathered at the front of the royal pavilion. 'How?'

'This is just a temporary influx,' Falco said. He waved his hand nonchalantly. 'Probably there is a high visit. The king or something ...'

They looked at each other and then burst out laughing. And then Falco's mouth fell open. In the distance walked a young woman with striking red hair. 'Vera?' he called out. He pulled his friend with him. 'Vera!'

Lothiriel

King Elessar or Aragorn, as her father called their new king, listened intently to her account. Lothiriel tried to minimise her own part, but was thwarted in this by her mother and Azra, who frequently interrupted her to point out to the men Lothiriel's courage and perseverance. The consultation ended in her being extensively praised, both by her father and her future king. Relieved that her role was now played out, she left the royal tent ... to be met by a group of townspeople with Captain Goran, her mentor, in the lead.

He looked at her proudly. 'I knew you would make it,' he said, pulling her against his chest. 'I knew the city was in good hands with you.'

'I had a good teacher,' Lothiriel said. As soon as the captain released her, there were others who wanted to greet her, shake her hand. And for the first time since the attack, she felt proud of her own part in the battle. She stood to greet them all, taking time especially for those who had lost a father, a brother or a friend. There seemed to be no end of hands and she smiled so much it made her cheeks hurt. 'I don't know you,' she said as she grabbed the next hand. Frowning, she looked at him. In a town with predominantly dark-haired people, such a blonde man would certainly stand out. 'Are you a man from Dol Amroth?'

He shook his head. 'I am a man of Rohan,' he said grinning. 'We met just now by the river where my men were taking a bath.'

Her eyebrow shot up and she thought of her mother's warning. 'I hope you don't take my friend's words too seriously,' she said, uncomfortable under his intense gaze. 'She is honest, but bold.' She tried to pull her hand free, but he held it firmly.

'Honesty is a valuable quality,' he said. 'Without honesty, you won't get anywhere.'

Lothiriel bent closer to him and looked him straight in the eye. 'That is so. And so is a lady's virtue.' She was annoyed by his doggedness and squeezed his hand firmly. 'So, calm down, soldier. This young lady is not to be conquered.' A puzzled look slid across his face and just then she heard someone calling her name. Both the man and Lothiriel turned around. From the distance, Erchirion was walking towards them. He was accompanied by other men, but shot forward from the group like a spear. At last the man loosed Lothiriel's hand and she ran towards Erchirion, faster and faster. She was relieved to see him, relieved that he was unharmed and she knew that, now that he was there, everything would be all right. Tears ran down her cheeks as she threw herself into his safe arms with a tiger's leap.

'Brother,' she moaned into his neck. 'How I missed you.'

Vera

The sun was slowly setting and the women had left the camp behind. But while the other three were enthusiastically engaged in conversation, Vera had not yet said a word. 'Tell me, why are you so quiet?' said Lothiriel. 'You found your brother, didn't you?' She drew big eyes. 'He's not hurt, is he?'

'No, my brother is fine,' Vera said. 'He was even remarkably cheerful for a soldier just out of the war.'

Vera felt how Lothiriel kept looking at her inquisitively and leaned closer to her. 'Is it possible, do you think, to fall in love at a glance?'

Lothiriel laughed briefly. 'Love at first sight? I have no experience of it myself, but people claim it exists.' Surprised, she looked at Vera. 'Are you in love?'

Vera slowed down so the women in front of them could not listen in. 'There was a man,' she said next. 'He was sweet, helpful ... and gorgeous.' She sighed.

Lothiriel opened her eyes even further. 'You really are in love,' she said. 'How do you do it anyway, Vera,' she said. 'The army has barely set up camp ... But why does it make you sad? I thought love made you jump over the moon with joy?'

'He was very supportive and warm at first. Until he heard that I am a widow. Then he suddenly became ... helpful, but less warm.'

'I feel terrible for you that your infatuation led to disappointment so soon,' Lothiriel said after a while. 'It makes you think ... As I feared, it is better not to get involved with love.'

'I owe a lot to Herudor,' Vera said, 'but I hope my marriage to him doesn't haunt me forever.'

'As I feared, it is also better not to get involved in marriage,' Lothiriel said, shaking her head.

'Cheer up, friend,' she said after a while. 'Next week will be one big party.' She lowered her voice and looked at Vera wistfully. 'You will soon forget your beautiful, sweet and warm lover.'

Vera smiled. 'Erchirion,' she said. 'That's his name, Erchirion.' She frowned. 'One wonders who in their right mind would give their son such a name.'

'What?', she asked when she saw that Lothiriel had remained standing.

'Erchirion? Is that the name of the man you fell in love with?' said Lothiriel, suddenly very serious. She put her horse back in motion. 'Erchirion, son of Imrahil, the prince of Dol Amroth?'

Vera's eyes grew big. 'Is Erchirion your brother?'

'There cannot possibly be more than one Erchirion,' Lothiriel said. 'As you said, who takes it into his head to give his son such a name?' She laughed uncomfortably. 'No, there is only one Erchirion. There is only one Erchirion who is sweet and warm.'

The two women laughed in amazement.

'I lose sight of you for a moment,' said Lothiriel, 'and you manage to fall in love. On my brother, on my dearest Erchirion!'

'Do you think ...,' Vera said as they drove into town. 'Is there a reason why he doesn't want anything with a widow?'

Lothiriel shook her head decidedly. 'It seems better not to speculate as to why he seemed to suddenly change his mind.'

Vera pulled a miserable face and Lothiriel rolled her eyes. 'But I do want to ask him,' she said.

Vera frowned. 'No, you're right. We'd better not speculate. Besides, it's intrusive.' She sighed.

'I don't want to give him the idea that I ...' Suddenly she looked at Lothiriel desperately. '... that I yearn for his touch, even if it's just a handshake, that I want to kiss him, caress him and bear his children.'

Lothiriel's mouth fell open. 'Is that what falling in love does to you?' She laughed hysterically.

'And you want to do all these things with my brother?'

translated from Dutch by DeepL