

DAY 2

*** 1 MAY ***

Eomer

Eomer rummaged panickily in his suitcase. The city's bells were already ringing; he had to hurry. 'Falco, Eolif,' he cried, 'where is my cloak?'

Eolif, Eomer's cousin and sentry, came running. 'I brushed him off some more,' he said as he helped Eomer into his cloak. 'The men are already ready.'

Hurriedly, the young king walked to the front row where Aragorn and Prince Imrahil were waiting for him. 'Ready?' said Imrahil. The two others nodded. Imrahil patted Aragorn comradely on the shoulder. 'Enjoy your last steps as a free man.'

Aragorn grinned, but his eyes betrayed his nervousness. Eomer sympathised with him. Soon they would all go their separate ways and from then on they would each have to make their own decisions. He gulped at the prospect.

With their armies in long lines behind them, they walked side by side to the battered city gate where their arrival was accompanied by the sounding of trumpets. Faramir, the governor, was waiting for them. The whole city had gathered around him, but Eomer had his eyes mainly on the young, blonde woman next to Faramir. He loved his sister, though he would never tell her. She was brave and strong ... and headstrong. He smiled. Hesitantly, she answered his smile. He felt relieved and happy at the same time. He averted his gaze just in time to see Gandalf solemnly place the crown on Aragorn's head. King Elessar's reign could begin. Cries of joy and applause rose from the crowd. Eomer's heart burst with excitement and joy. With his eyes, he searched for his sister and saw her ... hand in hand, talking to Faramir. As if hypnotised, he stared at them. As if sensing his gaze, she detached herself. She turned towards him and looked at him cautiously. She exchanged a few words with Faramir and then walked towards her brother.

'I have a lot to tell you,' she said. Eomer nodded, speechless. Then he opened his arms and hugged her.

Vera

Merry voices sounded from the window of a guesthouse a stone's throw from the citadel, punctuated by occasional laughter. From the bed, Vera studied Lothiriel sitting in her blue-and-silver dress in front of the dressing table. Except for a few details and the patterns of the embroidery, it was an exact copy of her mother's. Mother and daughter were very similar themselves, Vera saw. They both possessed an innate elegance that Vera would never possess. They strided rather than stepped and no movement was clumsy or uncontrolled as was often the case with Vera. She heaved an internal sigh. Beside them, she felt like a farm horse, bred to carry burdens and serve others.

Meanwhile, Biljana sprinkled her daughter with lavender water and braided silver ribbons through Lothiriel's hair, while Azra looked at the dresses lying on the bed. 'The mustard green dress really is the prettiest,' she said as she stroked the silk strips on the sleeves with her hands.

Vera nodded. 'If I have to choose between a mustard green, an apple green or a moss green, I'll follow you in your preference for the wedding dress. The only one I had any say in.' The other women looked at her questioningly. 'My husband chose my outfits,' she said. 'And since he paid for everything, I didn't dare go against it.'

'With your fiery hair, green is not the worst colour,' said Azra, herself dressed in a red dress. 'But maybe we can add some extra colour.' She fished a bag of ribbons out of her suitcase and threw it on the bed. 'See if you can find something to your liking in this,' she said as she also pulled out a wooden case with colourful powders and ointments.

Vera fished a jar of soft rose powder out of the case. 'I suspect you don't have some remedy for freckles?'

The three women looked at her in shock. From her chair, Lothiriel grabbed Vera's hand. 'Vera, you don't want to hide those freckles, do you? They make your face shine as if it were the sun itself.'

'Sweetheart, I have never met a woman as beautiful as you,' Biljana agreed.

Vera drew big eyes and her lip trembled. 'Don't cry,' the three women shouted simultaneously. 'That will make your eyes swell like that,' Azra said worriedly. They looked at each other and started laughing.

'Come, put on your dress,' Azra said. 'You will be the sunshine of the party.'

And while Lothiriel helped her mother with her silver flower crown, Azra braided ribbons in different ochre colours through Vera's red hair. She herself tucked a flower into her black curls. The four women looked at each other approvingly. 'We'll meet after the banquet at the folk festival,' Azra said, hooking her arm through Vera's. Vera laughed.

'And we urgently need to leave,' Biljana said. 'Lothiriel and I are already late.'

Eomer

King Elessar stood before the head table, surrounded by the captains of the army and the members of his travelling party. Eomer detached himself from the small group and walked towards Eowyn and Faramir, whom he now desperately wanted to get to know better. Halfway there, he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around. 'Rest assured,' said Prince Imrahil. 'My cousin Faramir is a fine fellow. With him, your sister is in good hands.'

Eomer frowned. 'You knew about it,' he said in surprise.

Now it was Imrahil who frowned. 'Didn't Erchirion tell you anything? My wife had written about it.'

Internally spoiling Erchirion, Eomer walked towards his sister and her lover. He greeted Faramir as courteously as he could and then burst out against his sister. 'The whole city knew about your relationship, why didn't you write to me?'

Eowyn looked at him in surprise, then she laughed. 'Writing? Brother, since when have we been writing to each other? And even if I had written to you, what answer could I expect?'

'Stay away from him' or 'give him my regards'? You know Faramir only from the stories told about him. She grasped Faramir's hand and looked at him fondly. 'Though those are not from the least.'

'All right,' Eomer sighed. 'I'll subject him to a thorough cross-examination before I give you my answer in writing.' They laughed.

'And do you expect me to follow your advice then?' asked Eowyn defiantly.

Eomer looked at her thoughtfully. 'No,' he then said, 'although I would wish it, it would be foolish to expect it from you.' He smiled. 'I understand that you will make your own decisions from now on.'

Eowyn kissed him on the cheek. 'Then I will leave you in each other's company,' she said and turned to a servant who escorted her to her seat.

The two men stood uneasily side by side. 'Sisters,' Eomer said, 'they are both a blessing and a scourge.'

'I can't speak about it,' Faramir said. 'I have no sisters, only a niece and she already has enough brothers to take care of her.'

'You are a cousin of the prince, and therefore also of Erchirion,' Eomer said thoughtfully.

Meanwhile, his friend walked into the main hall, accompanied on each arm by a stunningly beautiful woman. Eomer's mouth fell open. They disappeared into the crowd, but a moment later he saw his friend and the younger of the two ladies seated at the table where Eowyn was also sitting. Unconsciously, he clamped his jaws together. The traitor, he thought, the ... sneak!

Lothiriel

The banquet was slowly coming to an end. Lothiriel had had an entertaining conversation with Elfhelm, the older man sitting next to her. He turned out to be a marshal of Rohan and, together with Eowyn, he had entertained Erchirion and Lothiriel with stories from his country. In turn, they had tried to paint a picture of Dol Amroth. But all four agreed with each other that a country was best tasted through a visit.

Meanwhile, the conversation had fallen silent, the musicians packed up their instruments and the first guests left. Eowyn and Lord Elfhelm also said goodbye.

'There is a folk festival in the square with the fountain,' Lothiriel told Erchirion. 'There is music and dancing. Azra went to it.'

'I can hear you coming already,' Erchirion laughed. 'You want to go there too and I can escort you.'

'You should escort me, because given your reputation with women, I would like to ask you a favour,' she said as she hooked her arm in his and together they left the room.

'I have made some friends here over the past few weeks,' she said. 'And one of them could use some positive attention. Her husband died recently, but I think it was a terrible marriage.'

Erchirion paused. 'What exactly do you mean by "positive attention",' he asked suspiciously.

Lothiriel smiled. 'That's up to you,' she said. 'But I would like you to at least dance with her.'

'A dance should do,' he said. 'Is she very ugly?'

Shocked, Lothiriel looked at her brother. 'Ugly?'

Erchirion shrugged. 'Beautiful women usually don't need an intermediary to find a dance partner.'

Lothiriel smiled internally. 'Decide for yourself what you think of her,' she said.

The banquet had been long and it was already dusk when they arrived at the square. It was crowded but very pleasant. The square was decorated with flags and lights and the band was playing folk music. The innkeeper had put his tables and chairs outside. Like the stone benches at the edge of the square, they were full of people laughing and drinking. In the centre of the square, a wooden dance floor had been constructed where numerous couples were stomping, clapping and swaying. 'Great,' said Erchirion. 'This is exactly what I need.'

Eomer

King Eomer had said goodbye to his marshals and was now enjoying the smile on his sister's face as she twirled around with Faramir. It had been a long time since he had seen her so exuberant and his heart lit up at the sight of her happiness.

Meanwhile, on the dance floor, the couples made groups of four so that Eowyn and Faramir danced together with Erchirion and his partner. They laughed, twirled and bowed. Eomer looked at their happy faces and felt a stab of jealousy. He turned his back to the spectacle and closed his eyes. Behind him, the music slowly fell silent and a moment later Erchirion pushed a mug of beer into his hand. They made a toasting gesture and took a sip.

'I know you intend to get married,' he said. 'But you are making very quick work of your intention. Tell me, are you already engaged?'

'That's not me,' Erchirion said as he wiped his mouth.

'Afraid to take the final step?'

'No, not at all.' Erchirion grinned at his friend. 'Are you trying to flirt with me?'

Eomer turned back to the square. 'Then who is she?' He nodded in the direction of the dance floor where Lothiriel was meanwhile dancing with King Elessar in which she mostly tried to avoid his feet.

'Lothiriel? She's my sister.'

Eomer looked at his friend in surprise. 'Is she your sister?' He shook his head. 'You made me think she was still a child. How old is she?'

'Nineteen,' Erchirion said with obvious reluctance.

'At 19, you are no longer a child, Erchirion.'

Erchirion squeezed his eyes to slits. 'She's my little sister, Eomer.' His voice sounded like a warning.

On the dance floor, meanwhile, King Elessar smilingly followed Lothiriel's dance instructions. Her cheeks blushed, her eyes shone and they were clearly having fun.

'Do you object to me getting to know her better,' Eomer said without averting his gaze from her.

Erchirion growled.

'Weren't you the one who said we should let go of our sisters?' Eomer wiggled his eyebrow.

The music fell silent and on the dance floor, King Elessar thanked Lothiriel for the dance. 'It was a true pleasure, my lord,' Eomer heard her say as they walked together towards the two men.

King Elessar curled his lip. 'Do your toes think the same?' he said.

'Not even my bruised toes can undermine my sense of gratitude,' Lothiriel said. Only then did she notice Eomer. She looked at him with a mixture of surprise and annoyance before accepting the mug of beer her brother tossed to her. 'I feel grateful,' she said, ignoring Eomer, 'that I did not have to fight the beasts that have been rotting on the Pelennor for weeks.' She made a toasting gesture and drank several hefty gulps of ale.

Erchirion pulled up his nose. 'Still, the stench of those beasts is nothing compared to the smell of a troop of soldiers having to share a tent for weeks,' he said.

The men laughed and Lothiriel coughed, causing her beer to spurt onto Eomer's cloak. Startled, she looked up at him. 'I'm sorry,' she said as she made preparations to wipe away the stains. But Eomer intercepted her hand and turned to Erchirion. 'Maybe it's time you introduced us to each other.' He felt her trying to pull her hand free and held it tightly.

'Of course,' Erchirion said, throwing his friend a look of steel. 'King Eomer, allow me to introduce you to my sister, Lady Lothiriel.'

Lothiriel drew big eyes. 'Kóning Eomer? King Eomer of Rohan?' For a moment, lightning flickered in her eyes, then she nodded and bowed.

Eomer suppressed a smile and nodded back politely. 'Pleased to meet you.'

Only then did he loosen his grip. Quickly, she pulled her hand out of his and turned to King Elessar. 'I hope I did not cause a political incident by spitting on the king of our neighbouring country,' she said.

Above her head, the two kings exchanged glances. 'I don't think you should worry about that,' King Elessar said, smiling.

'What should my daughter not worry about?' said Prince Imrahil who unexpectedly stood by them.

'I spilled ale on King Eomer's cloak,' Lothiriel said.

'So you made a good first impression,' said the prince. 'In that case, I suspect you won't mind too much if I steal my daughter away for a dance.'

Lothiriel looked at her father in surprise. 'A dance?'

Imrahil nodded and grabbed her hand. 'Yes, a dance. Come, hurry. This happens to be the only folk dance I know.'

Lothiriel handed her cup to Erchirion, made a short bow to the gentlemen and followed her father to the dance floor.

Eomer looked at her. As cheerful as she had been during her dance with King Elessar, the dance with her father was so serious. 'Is he upset because of the spilled beer,' he wondered aloud.

'Possibly,' Erchirion said. 'Or he has some husband in mind for her again.'

Eomer's gaze slid to King Elessar, but the latter raised his hands in denial.

'I'm warning you, Eomer,' said Erchirion who had caught the look. 'She is my sister. Touch her and I'll kill you.'

'You came up with the idea of marrying each other's sisters.'

'I was drunk. Besides, your sister has set her sights on someone else.'

'And you knew about that, but you kept it from me.'

King Elessar looked at his friends in amazement.

It was Erchirion who first lowered his gaze. 'I was trying to warn you.' His anger subsided. 'You treat her with respect,' he said, 'or you meet my sword.'

Eomer nodded. 'I promise to treat her with respect.' He held out his hand.

Erchirion hesitated, but finally grabbed his friend's hand. 'I will hold you to that promise,' he said.

'And even though I have no idea what is going on, I am a witness to this promise,' King Elessar said as he placed his hand on his friends' and looked at them alternately.

'I need more beer,' Erchirion said with a defeated look.

King Elessar grinned. 'I can take care of that.' He patted both men on the shoulder.

Eomer turned to the dance floor where the subject of their discussion was still spinning circles with her father. He rubbed his chin. Only weeks ago, he had led an entire army, toppling mûmakils and fighting orks. How hard could it be to conquer a lady?

Lothiriel

On the dance floor, Lothiriel looked at her father. 'To what do I owe the honour of this dance?' she said.

'To the fact that you are my daughter and I would love to dance with you.'

Lothiriel's gaze tightened. 'Father ...'

'Very well,' he sighed, 'I yield. Let me remind you that this is a unique opportunity. You will rarely find so many suitable husbands together again. Chieftains, army superiors, unmarried kings ...'

'Father,' Lothiriel interrupted him reprimandingly, 'you promised ...'

'I know what I promised,' he interrupted her. 'And I will keep my promise. But you have to think about your future.'

Lothiriel clamped her lips together and they spun a few rounds in silence. 'I'm still young,' she finally said. 'I still have time.'

'You are still young,' her father agreed. 'But I am getting older fast. This may have been the last time I went to war myself.' He pulled her closer into his arms. 'Who will take care of you when I am gone?'

Lothiriel looked at her father, startled. 'But you are still fine, aren't you? You're still healthy, right?'

Her father nodded. 'But one of the things I have learnt in recent months is that I am mortal, as mortal as the men who have fallen.'

Lothiriel swallowed and blinked away her tears. 'I don't want to leave yet,' she said a moment later. She looked into her father's eyes tightly. 'I don't want to leave yet. Not from you and not from mother, not from my brothers and not from Dol Amroth.'

Now it was her father's turn to blink away his tears. 'I'm not sending you away, sweetheart. I don't want to lose you. But I would feel more reassured if I knew there was someone who will

take care of you when I'm gone.' He snorted, 'Preferably someone who loves you as much as I do. Someone who loves you as much as I love your mother.'

'I don't know if that's possible,' Lothiriell laughed through her tears. 'I know few people who love each other that much.'

In silence, they danced on. The music stopped and Lothiriell laid her head on her father's shoulder. 'I love you,' she said.

Her father pressed a kiss on her head. 'And I love you too, my little flower.'

Lothiriell smiled at the pet name she had not heard for too long.

Falco

In an alley, much lower down in the city, two figures sat in an intimate embrace against the wall of the abandoned washroom.

'I told you Minas Tirith has many secret places,' Falco's friend said. 'And tonight there are more than ever, because the whole city is celebrating in the square.'

'I like private parties more,' Falco whispered into his friend's ear after which he gently bit him on the earlobe.

'Man,' groaned his friend, 'you're as horny as a young stallion.'

'I'm a young stallion,' Falco whispered. He kissed his friend, intimately and long.

'Calm down,' warned his friend as Falco's hand slid down his trousers. 'The night is still young and there are more beautiful corners in town.'

Falco laughed softly. 'Show them to me,' he said. 'Show them all to me.'

Lothiriell

'Come,' Lothiriell said as she grabbed her brother by the arm and pulled him along. 'Time for a dance with my friend.'

She manoeuvred him between the dancing couples to the other side of the dance floor where Vera was just finishing her dance with Lord Elfhelm. Lothiriell tapped Vera on the shoulder and she turned around. She was blushing from dancing and, if anything, looked even more radiant than usual.

'Vera, I would like to introduce you to my brother Erchirion,' she said, winking at her friend.

Vera looked from Erchirion to Lothiriell in surprise. 'What a ... coincidence,' she said, turning to Erchirion. 'Haven't we met before?'

Erchirion stood there perplexed. 'Lady Vera,' he finally said, 'pleasant to see you again.'

He turned to his sister with a strange look. 'Is this the friend you were talking about?'

Lothiriell nodded. 'She is a particularly good friend,' she said, emphasising "particularly" and "good".

He swallowed and turned to Vera. 'Lady Vera, would you be so kind as to dance with me?'

'Gladly,' Vera said enthusiastically. 'I'd like to dance with you.'

Lothiriell watched them as they hopped across the dance floor together. There had been something in Erchirion's gaze, something she had never seen in him before. A mixture of fear

and helplessness, she thought. Suddenly she doubted whether she had done the right thing in bringing them together.

Erchirion

Erchirion loved to dance. He loved the music, the fast and graceful movements and the interaction with his dance partner. But now, looking at the lady whose hand he was holding, he felt utterly helpless. Lady Vera smiled enthusiastically at him, her face all sunshine. Erchirion's heart darted excitedly through his chest cavity. As the violinist finished the introduction and the drums and fiddles kicked in, Erchirion nervously answered her smile, did two hopping steps in her direction and stepped on her foot in the process. He looked up and apologised, but Vera was still smiling, seemingly unaware of his misstep. Erchirion looked at her regular white teeth, her curled lips, and as a result was three seconds too late to join the circle, causing the man behind him to bump into him. Again Erchirion apologised. The man looked at him angrily. The circle of men and the circle of women were now stepping in opposite directions and with every step that Vera moved further away from him, Erchirion's heart tumbled further down, only to land with a leap right up to his throat as soon as she faced him again. 'You're back,' he said happily. Vera laughed and hooked her green and brown speckled eyes into his. They clapped each other's hands, spun around their axes and hopped hand in hand in the wrong direction braving a half-circle in the opposite direction before turning around. All the while, their eyes held each other. At the end of the dance, Erchirion's hands slipped around her waist, he lifted her up and swung her around. The music stopped, the dance was over. Laughing and still panting, they remained standing. Her hands were heavy on his shoulders, he kept his where he had last put them. In his chest, his heart was racing like a storm bell.

Eomer

Eomer stood in the shadow of the city wall observing the festivities in the square. Although his mother had tried to teach him, dancing had never interested him. But he now found that studying dancing couples was an enjoyable pastime. For instance, while dancing, his sister and his cousin Eolif were more interested in their conversation than in setting the right dance steps.

Erchirion and Lady Vera also seemed to care little for the intended dance pattern, though there was little conversation among them. Eomer smiled. Without breaking their eye contact, they managed to create a whole new dance in which they seemed to constantly touch each other as if by accident. That they thus disrupted the other couples' dance did not seem to bother them.

The only ones dancing neatly in tune were Faramir and Lothiriel, whom Eomer understood by now were cousins.

The music fell silent, the dancers changed partners or, like Lothiriel, left the dance floor. Out of the corner of his eye, Eomer watched her walk to the edge of the square and stretch her neck to catch the fresh breeze that blew gently over the city wall. As if hypnotised, he stared at her slender neck and proud shoulders. And then suddenly he was standing next to her and she looked up at him in surprise.

She nodded at him. 'King Eomer,' she said formally with the emphasis on 'king'.

'Lady Lothiriel,' he replied, nodding back politely.

'It disappoints me,' she said after an awkward pause, 'that yesterday I was addressed by a soldier of Rohan who assured me that he held honesty in high regard, while today it turns out that he is no ordinary soldier, but the king of Rohan in person.' Even in the pale moonlight, he saw her eyes twinkle. 'Without honesty you will get nowhere, he claimed. So, tell me, Your Majesty, where are we? Somewhere or nowhere?'

Surprised, Eomer blinked his eyes. 'I didn't mean to fool you,' he said. 'You assumed I was an ordinary soldier and I didn't get the time to introduce myself.' He cleared his throat. 'So, to answer your question. I think we are somewhere.' He looked her straight in the eye. 'We are at a merry folk festival and we are trying to have a pleasant conversation.'

Lothiriel rolled her eyes and remained silent.

'By the way, I wanted to tell you that I accept your challenge,' he said after a while.

'Challenge?', she said looking up at him in surprise.

'To conquer you.'

Lothiriel drew big eyes. 'That was not a challenge, but a warning,' she hissed angrily.

'Don't back down now,' he said pedantically.

'I'm not backtracking. I'm just trying to clear up a misunderstanding.' Her eyes sparkled. 'It wasn't a challenge,' she said again.

She averted her gaze and remained stubbornly silent. In the silence that followed, Eomer searched diligently for an appropriate topic of conversation. He followed Lothiriel's gaze to the dance floor.

'You like to dance,' he finally said.

She looked at him angrily. 'I also like swimming, horse riding, making music, singing, reading and good conversation. My favourite colour is apple blue sea green, I love the smell of lavender and my favourite fruit is an orange. Is there anything else you wish to know, my Lord?'

Eomer looked at her in surprise. Then he shook his head and started laughing.

'What actually motivates people to spin endlessly together on a cramped dance floor,' he finally said, when the silence became uncomfortable again.

Still upset, Lothiriel looked at him. 'Dancing is more than just spinning around, stomping and shuffling your feet,' she said. 'Dancing is like a good conversation, with questions and answers of spoken and unspoken words. At its best, it is a unique moment when two beings come together harmoniously in body and soul.'

He looked at her perplexed, wondering if she was still talking about dancing. 'And at worst?' he said.

'At worst, it proceeds as laboriously and uncomfortably as this conversation,' she said. 'With the only clear outcome being the knowledge that there will be no next dance.'

Eomer swallowed.

On the dance floor, the music fell silent again, the dancers changing partners or leaving the dance floor. Out of the corner of his eye, Eomer saw his cousin Eolif walking towards them. 'Considering you've been standing by all evening, I suspect you don't dance?' said Lothiriel. He shook his head. 'I can't dance, unfortunately,' he said. 'But I now wish I could. In that case, I would love to ask you to dance.'

'Honestly?'

He sighed. 'What can I do to prove to you that I am an honest man?'

'Dance with me,' she said. 'And that does challenge.' At that moment, Eolif held out his hand to her. Lothiriel nodded politely to the king, accepted Eolif's hand and followed him to the dance floor.

Eomer was left at the edge of the square, wondering in amazement what had gone wrong.

Falco

The sun was already starting to rise again as the party drew to a close. The city finally fell silent. Near the city gate, the hinges of a door creaked and a moment later two shadows walked hand in hand down the steps of the barracks.

'I hate having to return to the tent camp,' said one.

'I hope you'll come and see me in town from time to time,' the other said. He pulled his friend against him and kissed him, briefly and forcefully. 'I hate having to let you go soon.'

'Shut up,' said the one friend. 'Shut up about it, until that day arrives I don't want to hear of any goodbyes.' He put his head in his lover's neck and sniffed.

'You really are a stallion,' laughed the other.

'I am your stallion,' replied the one.

After a final kiss, his friend pushed him towards the city gate. 'Even stallions need to sleep,' he said. 'Hup, back to your stable.'

Falco looked back once more, then he walked through the city gate, up the Pelennor. He stroked his lips with his fingertips and smiled. Love was ... delightful, he thought. Humming softly, he followed the road to the army camp. Within hours, he was off guard again.

By Ella Smidts 2024

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