

Lothiriel

The long way home



Prologue

"Release me, pirate! Or I'll pierce you with my sword," the boy shouted as he swung his stick. The boy on the ground looked at the tip of the 'sword' with feigned agony.

"No, no, Dragomir!" the girl said. "You must throw the bag of weed into the fire. Grandma never killed a pirate. She only put him to sleep."

"It's a lame story," Dragomir said. "I'd rather play the story of Thorongil attacking the pirates with his fleet." He pushed the stick through his belt and pouted, crossing his arms.

The boy on the ground scribbled straight and gestured with his hands. "You see," Dragomir said, "Tihomir also prefers to play ..."

"But that's not a real story," the girl interrupted him. "Thorongil never existed, but Grandma did. She really did fight a pirate."

"Thorongil did exist, father says. Grandpa sailed with him to Umbar," Dragomir said. "You only want to play Grandma's story because it involves kissing."

Angrily, the girl clucked her tongue. "There's no kissing in Grandma's story," she said as she crossed her arms like her cousin. "You only do that when you're married. Besides, in Thorongil there are no girls ..." She was distracted by Tihomir's adrift gestures. "Very well," she sighed when he had finished gesticulating, "Tihomir is right. I will play a girl pirate, though."

And as Dragomir thrust his chest forward and drew his sword with a swift movement, Tihomir wrapped his arms around the girl and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

The sun was already descending when a young fellow walked onto the beach. There he encountered the three friends in a fierce mock fight. "Lothiriel," he called out after a while. The girl looked back and was punished for her inattention with a deadly dagger thrust from Dragomir. She died another tragic death before running toward her brother.

"It is time to come home. Uncle Denethor and our cousins have arrived," he said.

She pulled a pout. "What good is that to me," she said. "They never talk to me anyway." Nevertheless, she willingly allowed herself to be lifted into her brother's neck. "Erchirion," she asked as they walked down the beach under the pines, "do you think Grandma and the pirate kissed?"

Erchirion stopped and turned his head so he could look at his sister. "I think so," he said. "But I don't think Grandma liked it."

"Because she was married to Grandpa by then," Lothiriel nodded. She plucked the pine cone hanging over her head, picking out a kernel. Thoughtfully, she nibbled on it. "I don't think I ever want to kiss anyone," she said. "Unless maybe Tihomir." And as Erchirion climbed the steps to the bathhouse, she picked a new seed from the pine cone.



PART 1

I. Farewell to the men

With a jittery glance, Lothiriél looked back. Her pursuer was no longer in sight. Nevertheless, she pushed her heels deeper into her horse's flanks. Lysippe shot at a full gallop down the narrow coastal path. The mountainside on her right was bare and ran steeply uphill; the precipice on her left was deep and ended in churning and foaming sea water. Yet Lothiriél only slowed her speed when the pale city walls of Dol Amroth appeared in the distance.

On the last cliff before the beach, she stopped and took off. As she patted Lysippe gratefully on the neck she looked at her city. She loved Dol Amroth; the narrow, steep streets, the pleasant bustle of the harbor and the morning market, her family and especially Tihomir. But if it depended on her father, Dol Amroth would not be her home for long.

Since war threatened, he had decided it was time she married, preferably to a potential ally. Unfortunately, the candidates she had met so far had been old, authoritarian or barbaric. Men for whom she was merely a pretty ornament for their great hall, or worse, a breeding mother for offspring, as with Derufin.

Not only had he groped her and tried to kiss her, but he had sincerely believed he had every right to do so. He had asked for an introductory ride. And she had introduced him ... to her knee.

She turned and looked into her horse's deep brown eyes. "What do you think? Shall we get away together?" Lysippe shook her head. "No?" Lothiriel sighed. Indeed, fleeing made no sense. It was only a matter of time before war erupted and from then on she would be safe nowhere. She turned to the East where lay Mordor, the land of Sauron. A land rumored to be filled with orcs and other scum, ready to invade Gondor and subjugate its inhabitants to the will of the Dark Lord. No, soon she would be safe nowhere. With little hope, she mounted her horse and steered Lysippe up the path toward the beach.

Lothiriel was not the only rider approaching the city. Some distance behind her rode Derufin, son of Duinhir, lord of Morthond. Like Lothiriel, he followed the coastal path, but unlike her, he rode slowly because his crotch was still burning from the encounter with her knee, and he found the steep path up the cliff treacherous and life-threatening. He also found Lothiriel life-threatening. Although she looked like a highborn lady, she behaved like a wild animal. His father and Prince Imrahil could forget about that marriage.

A third horseman approached Dol Amroth from the east, and despite his fatigue, he crossed the hills with great speed. He came with an urgent message for Prince Imrahil, Lothiriel's father. A message that would change the lives of them all forever.

Except for a few gulls, the beach was deserted. Lothiriel dismounted. Under the shelter of the pines behind the beach, she stripped the clothes off her body. Dressed only in her undershirt, she walked to the waterline and plunged into the waves. The chill took her breath away for a moment, but as soon as she regained her normal breathing rhythm, she disappeared underwater. The screams of the gulls hushed and the world became slow and silent. Above her, the light of the descending sun shone rippling through the water. She swam above the seabed for a while, searching for shells, and only rose to the surface when she ran out of breath. With her eyes closed, she let herself float on the rolling waves to the beach, meanwhile soaking up the salty sea scent. When she finally washed ashore, it felt as if the sea was forcing her to return to reality. She reluctantly left the water. Under the pines, above her wet shirt, she put her clothes back on.

In the stables at the edge of town, she brushed Lysippe dry, filled her rack with fresh hay and gave her an extra handful of oats. She walked past the seaweed baths up the steps to the square and climbed the balcony of the bathhouse to the roof of the smithy. From there she jumped to the roof of the barracks. She knocked twice on the hatch above the dining hall and waited. It was her brother Amrothos who let her in. "Can't you just come through the front door like everyone else?" he said annoyed.

Lothiriel ignored his question. "Is Tihomir here?" she asked as she lowered herself through the hatch.

"He walks guard on the harbor wall," he said. "By the way, weren't you out with Derufin?"

"I cut our acquaintance short," she said with a steely look. "If father is looking for me, I haven't been here." She left the barracks by the back door, walked through the garden with its five-

hundred-year-old olive tree and descended unseen to the harbor by her usual route across rooftops and balconies.

She saw him from afar, tall and slender in his blue and silver uniform. She waved and he came in her direction. When he finally stood in front of her she smiled, but he looked worried.

"You swam," he gestured. He lifted her chin. "And cried."

Lothiriel snorted, "Derufin was acting like a troll," she said.

"What happened?" he gestured. She read the indignation in his eyes.

"It's all right," she said, sighing. "At least for now. I wish I could convince father to forget his wedding plans."

Tihomir frowned. "I wish I could marry you," he gestured. "I could make you happy."

Lothiriel smiled sadly. "Father is not looking for a man to make me happy, but for an ally for the war. Unless you have a secret army hidden somewhere, you don't stand a chance."

Disappointed, Tihomir shook his head.

"But you would indeed make me happy," she said, kissing him briefly on the mouth. "And we could stay here, in Dol Amroth."

"Together," he gestured.

Smiling, Lothiriel copied his movement. It was one of the first gestures they had devised, years ago, when it appeared that Tihomir's voice was not developing.

He kissed her forehead and pulled her tenderly against his chest. And as their fingers intertwined and Lothiriel found peace in the rhythmic beating of his heart, the sea breeze slowly chased a rain shower their way.

The first raindrops fell as Lothiriel walked into the citadel. She suspected that Derufin had reached the city under his own power by now. If not, there was more than just rain hanging over her head. She found her father in the library where he stood bent over a map. He was alone. "Father ...," she began, but with his eyes on the map, he gestured for her to remain silent.

"What am I to do with you?" he said as he finally looked at her. "Amrothos told me you returned an hour ago." He sighed. "I have no idea what happened between the two of you, but Derufin just made it clear to me that there can be no question of marriage." His hand slid through his hair. "He thinks you are wild and uneducated."

Lothiriel's eyes flew open with indignation. "I'm wild and uneducated?" she said. "He behaved like a barbarian, like a pirate, like a ... Father, he grabbed my ..." Her father gestured again for her to remain silent.

"Whatever has happened, Lord Duinhir and his son wish to return home as soon as possible. They are currently on their way to the stable," he said.

"Just before nightfall?" said Lothiriel. "In this weather?"

Her father nodded. "I see you understand the gravity of the situation." He looked again at the map before him. "It is certain that Sauron is preparing for a major battle, but it is uncertain exactly where he will strike. If, as we suspect, the pirates of Umbar have joined him, there is a real chance that the south coast of Gondor will be his first target." He rubbed his chin. "In

that case, we will have to defend not only our own city, but the entire bay." His gaze slid to his daughter. "How are we supposed to manage that, when you are driving away our allies?"

"I only chase away allies who don't know how to behave," she said in a narrowed voice. "Father, surely we can form an alliance without my having to marry?"

Her father nodded. "That is so. But I know from experience that an alliance is stronger when sealed by marriage. And after that fiasco years ago," he raised his hands repulsively, "your mother and I have agreed that you will decide whether or not the marriage goes through," he said. "But I would be very grateful should you choose someone who can help us defend our city."

"What about Uncle Denthor," she asked. "Surely he can come and help us, should the need arise?"

"I fear it will be rather the other way around," said the prince. "Minas Tirith does still have a decent city guard, but Denethor's forces have been suffering heavy losses for years."

Lothiriel's oldest brother came in. "We have an urgent visitor," he said.

All eyes turned to the man hanging exhausted and wet against the doorframe. "I come from Lord Denethor," he said. "Sauron's forces are already moving through Itilien as we speak. I bring you this." Bewildered, they looked at the man's hands in which lay an arrow with black feathers and a red tip.

"The time has come," Prince Imrahil said after a brief silence. He looked at his eldest son. "Get Duinhir. With any luck, he hasn't left yet. And you," he said to his daughter, "You make sure this man gets food and a place to sleep." He suddenly looked at her sharply. "We haven't finished talking about what happened today."

From the balcony of her room, Lothiriel looked out at the square. Despite the rain and the falling darkness, there was much activity. The arrival of 'the red arrow' meant that Uncle Denethor, Steward of Gondor, was asking for their urgent help. It looked as if Sauron would not invade Gondor along the coast, but along Itilien to the east from where he could strike directly at the capital of their empire.

Her father had retired to the library with Lord Duinhir to discuss how many troops they could each spare without leaving their own areas unprotected. About an hour ago, Duinhir and his son had left back for Morthond, and since then Lothiriel had seen both captains of the city guard and captains-at-sea enter the citadel. A few weeks ago she and Tihomir had passed the captain's exam themselves, but an official appointment to their position would now be out of the question.

A knock at the door announced her mother's arrival. Biljana walked to the balcony and put her arm around her daughter's shoulder. "Your father told me Derufin couldn't keep his hands to himself," she said. "Are you all right?"

Lothiriel looked at the ground. "It was horrible," she said. "His hands were everywhere. Especially where they shouldn't be. I protested and tried to fend him off, but he laughed and said he was entitled to a taste. He's a big man, mother ... I had no choice but to hurt him."

"No one has the right to touch you uninvited," Biljana said angrily. "We should have sent someone with you. You did the right thing and I'm glad you were able to stand your ground."

She gave her daughter a hug. "And as for your father ... I hope he finally comes to his senses and forgets that ridiculous idea of an arranged marriage." She squeezed Lothiriel on the shoulder. "Every woman has the right to marry the man she loves ... That brings me to Tihomir. Your father has summoned him. He wants to make you both captains before he leaves." Biljana pushed her daughter into the room. "Come, quickly put on your uniform."

It was finally close to midnight when Prince Imrahil gave his daughter and Tihomir their captain's badge. Despite his haste, he made it a small ceremony. Lothiriel's mother and three brothers were present as well as Tihomir's mother and sister who were both working in the citadel. A glass of wine was drunk and to Tihomir's great joy, Imrahil expressed his wish at the toast to take him to Minas Tirith. Lothiriel asked her father for the same favor.

"During a battle, I need people who obey me blindly, and that is a quality you do not possess," he said. Lothiriel was embarrassed when she saw the disappointment in his eyes. "Besides, I don't think Denethor is so desperate that he expects our women to join the fight." He looked at her thoughtfully. "But I need someone to defend our city in my absence. And I will gladly leave Dol Amroth in your hands. Considering you managed to chase off a big guy like Derufin, you'll be able to handle an attack by pirates, too." Lothiriel doubted whether to take this as a compliment, but she dared not ask him to reconsider his decision.

Despite the activity in and around the citadel that night, Lothiriel must have slept, for Tihomir had climbed up to her balcony and he woke her with a loud knock on her window.

"We can still persuade father to change his plans," she said as he shook the rain out of his hair. Tihomir looked at her. His cheeks blushed from the cool outside air. "I'm going with your father," he gestured. "I'd like this."

"But ... why?" said Lothiriel.

"You have been to Minas Tirith many times," he gestured. "But for me, this may be the only chance to see the white city."

The lure of adventure made his eyes sparkle. "You don't leave on an excursion," Lothiriel said desperately, "you go to war."

"I will show your father that I am a brave warrior, and that I can be a good husband," he gestured. Gently he lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. Then he kissed her, searchingly, softly and sweetly.

"I'm in your brother's company," he gestured when they finally let go of each other.

"That's good," she said. "Erchirion will watch over you."

With feigned indignation, Tihomir looked at her. Showing his muscle, he lifted her up and threw her onto the bed. "I will watch over him," he gestured.

Lothiriel pulled him onto the bed. "I will miss you terribly," she said as soon as he lay beside her. Her fingers slid from his wet hair to the dimple in his chin and caressed the soft stubble on his lower jaw. "Please come back safely," she whispered. They lay like that for a while looking at each other, the prince's daughter and the maid's son. They had been born on the same stormy night, nineteen years ago here in the citadel. They had been laid in a cradle together and had never been separated since that day ... until now.

When Lothiriel awoke several hours later, Tihomir was gone. In his place lay his lucky chain with the sea opal, a rare shell he had found years ago. Underneath was the plan they had made together as an assignment for their captain's exam.

It became an exodus the likes of which had not been seen in Dol Amroth for a long time. More than 800 warriors on horseback swarmed around the stables and pastures on the outskirts of the city. Blacksmiths had been stoking their fires all night. Horses had been re-shod and swords, daggers and spears repaired. Even now, at the hour of departure, people were still bustling back and forth between their workhouses and the stables.

"I am saying goodbye, but I hope to see you back soon in good health," Prince Imrahil told his daughter. From his horse, he looked down on her.

Lothiriel grabbed his horse's bridle. "I won't disappoint you again," she said.

"I know that," he said, placing his hand on hers. "And should war come to Dol Amroth, you will be ready for the task that awaits you." Lothiriel looked at him in surprise. Was this a compliment? "May I give you one last piece of advice?" he said. She nodded. "When I was your age I learned that no matter how real danger is, the fear of it is mainly here." He pointed to his head. "Keep your head clear. Don't talk yourself into fear," he said. He squeezed her hand and took his position at the forefront.

"I will miss you, big brother," Lothiriel said to Erchirion a moment later. "Please don't play the hero unnecessarily."

Erchirion grinned. "We will need heroes."

"Living heroes," she said. "Heroes who can tell their own story." Her eyes grew moist and Erchirion grabbed her. "Come here, sister. I'll squeeze out your tears." He squeezed her tightly in his arms and Lothiriel let her tears flow. "I will take good care of Tihomir," he whispered in her ear.

She smiled and wiped away her tears with the back of her hand. "Don't let him notice," she said. "He's quite sensitive about it." She gave her brother one last kiss and walked over to her friends. Damirah and Mirna, Tihomir's mother and sister, were just saying goodbye.

"Too bad you can't come with us," said her cousin Dragomir. "No doubt it will be a great adventure."

Concerned, Lothiriel shook her head. "What is it with you, that you see war as a pleasure trip?" Sighing, she hugged him. "Take care of each other," she said. Then she pulled Tihomir close to her. "Wherever you are, in light or darkness, know that I am thinking of you," she said. "I love you." She patted her chest twice with her fist.

He loosened his grip, looked into her eyes and copied her gesture. Then he took off and rode off to war with Dragomir.

Lothiriel watched them for a while longer and then walked into the stables where her youngest brother Amrothos was preparing to leave with the rear guard. She found him in the stable of her own horse. "Why is Lysippe saddled?" she said.

"My horse is limping," he said. "Besides, Lysippe is faster."

She stood wide-legged in front of her brother. "You can't just take my horse. You should have at least asked," she said angrily. "Lysippe is as dear to me as a friend. And what horse should I ride now?"

"You don't need a horse," he said as he continued to mount Lysippe. "You need to defend the city."

"And if I have to flee?" she reached for Lysippes' halter, but Amrothos fended her off.

"Fleeing is not an option. You overcome, or you die," he said. Lothiriel looked at him in bewilderment. Amrothos shrugged and jumped on the horse. "Perhaps you had better give Derufin his way," he said with a grin. Then he rode away.

"Bastard!" Lothiriel called after him. Then she dropped to her knees. After Tihomir, she had now also lost Lysippe. She did not want to think about Amrothos' harsh words for the time being.

The sun was already high when the last soldiers left the stables. The blacksmiths packed their conveniences onto a cart and rode after their troops, ready to provide them with new weapons if necessary. The bustle that had hung in and around the city all morning suddenly faded into a painful silence.

"I will miss our men," Lothiriel said to Mirna as they climbed the steps to the citadel together. "Especially your brother. I miss him already."

"What does an ork actually look like?" said Mirna. "The fishmonger says they eat human flesh." She grabbed Lothiriel by the hand. "I'm so afraid I'll never see Tihomir again."

Lothiriel looked at her young friend's bedraggled face. "I have heard that they cannot ride horses, and as it happens, Tihomir is the fastest rider in Dol Amroth, and a very good swordsman too. We'll see him again, alive and well," she said.

Back in her room, she unrolled the map Tihomir had left behind. Captain Goran, their mentor, had made them draw a plan of Dol Amroth as part of their captain's exam on which they should have indicated how best to defend the city in the event of an attack from the sea. They had relied on the '15 truths of warfare' according to General Sunju, a great general from a previous era. In making their plan, Tihomir and she had assumed the best possible occupation of the city guard. Unfortunately, her father had left with the best forces, and Lothiriel now realized that their lines of defense had been thinned even before any attack took place.

She was studying the plan so intently that she was startled when suddenly her oldest brother Elphir stood beside her. She presented the defense plan to him and made notes where he had ideas for improvement.

"Father thinks Sauron will deploy all his men in the same place," he said. "Personally, I fear the pirates will take advantage of our weakened defenses. I fear they do not care about the fifth truth of Sunju." He pointed to the corner of the map where Lothiriel and Tihomir had written down the fifteen truths. "Truth number five: Prevent the siege of a walled city," he read aloud. He shook his head and pointed to the bay on the map. "I will leave tonight with the fleet and stay near Dol Amroth for now. Perhaps father is right and there is nothing to fear. But should the pirates do attack, we'll be nearby."

“Father thinks I'm ready for this,” Lothiriel said. “I wish I thought so too, but the truth is I'm afraid. Afraid that I will fail him and all of you.”

Elphir looked at her. “You're still young,” he said. “And you haven't seen battle yet. I wish I could reassure you and tell you it will be all right.” He shook his head gently. “Unfortunately, that would be a lie. If the pirates attack, it will be an uphill battle.” He kissed her on her head. “But even if you don't feel it yourself yet, father is right. You are ready. You will find your courage.”

That very evening, Lothiriel called her uncle Gojko and the three remaining captains together. Uncle Gojko was her mother's brother and since the death of their father he had taken on his duties as harbor master. Before that, he had been captain-at-sea in Dol Amroth's fleet for many years. Years during which he had regularly encountered pirates. Captain Bogdan and Captain Jarmil were only a few years older than Lothiriel and, like her, had not yet seen combat. Captain Branimir was Dragomir's brother and Uncle Gojko's oldest son. He had been eager to travel with the others to Minas Tirith, but had remained in the city at Prince Imrahil's request.

The five of them bent over the plan. “Elphir is in the bay with the fleet,” Lothiriel said. “That's our first line of defense. The second line is formed by blockades at the access to the harbor and to the beach.”

Uncle Gojko rubbed his chin. “Pirates are usually good swordsmen,” he said, “and because of their previous raids, they have a rough idea of the layout of our city.”

“Still, I think we have the terrain on our side,” Lothiriel said. “Dol Amroth's assets are its many staircases and steep, narrow streets that allow the pirates to push through to the citadel only a few at a time. And although we can't change the layout of the city, we can use barricades to create a cul-de-sac in several places.” She pointed out on the map the places she meant. “There we can enclose them and slaughter them with our archers.”

“We only have about a hundred archers,” Bogdan said. “We will have to use them wisely.”

“Indeed. That is why we must properly direct the flow of pirates. They should enter the city only past certain places and by mouthfuls.” She shifted her finger over the plan. “The entrance from the beach should remain closed for as long as possible. Then we can deploy our archers in the harbor first. Once we have rallied the pirates somewhere, the archers should move and attack them from higher ground.”

“How are you going to manage that,” Uncle Gojko asked.

“The twelfth truth of Sunju,” Lothiriel said. “Be unpredictable.” She smiled. “Our archers move along rooftops and balconies.”

Then she pointed to the old water reservoir near the harbor, where a crack in the outer wall had rendered it unusable as it flooded with sea water every time the tide was high. “The first truth according to Sunju says to avoid a fight whenever possible,” she said. “This is an idea of Tihomir's. If we can lure the enemy into the reservoir, we should not fight. We seal off the reservoir and wait for them to drown.”

Uncle Gojko nodded approvingly. “Depending on the tide, that could work.”

Lothiriel turned to Bogdan. "You take charge of the archers. With four small units, you should be fine." Bogdan nodded. He himself was better with his bow than with his sword. "You defend the beach access," she said to Jarmil. He, too, nodded.

"With your permission, I am defending the port," Branimir said.

Lothiriel nodded. "Then I will take charge of the citadel."

"And I set up downtown," Uncle Gojko said.

After they left, Lothiriel lingered in the library for a while watching their plan. The meeting with the men had given her confidence. With renewed energy, she said goodbye to Elphir a little later, along with her mother, his wife and their baby.

The plan unrolled over the next two days and the entire city helped. Fishermen closed off access to the harbor by sinking several old ships. Lothiriel and her captains roamed the streets looking for the best locations for ambushes and had flammable barricades erected in strategic places. Some streets were even completely bricked up along one side. Shutters and doors were boarded up. Lothiriel showed Bogdan and his archers the numerous shortcuts that Tihomir and they had been using for years. They walked across rooftops, balconies and through the wooden shutters still present in the roofs of the city's oldest houses. These were used long ago, when the city did suffer frequent attacks, to escape. Now the archers would use them to get from one place to another quickly and unseen. They researched the best route to evacuate the inhabitants if necessary, and they had supplies hidden in various locations.

Under Jarmil's guidance, the children made strings of sea urchins that were laid on the tide line. Their parents strung ropes and chains between the trees behind the beach so that the enemy would not get to the town's edge without obstacles. Finally, five large, floating log piles were made. They were pulled into the sea and anchored. "You cannot fight a battle without the necessary show of fire," Jarmil told Lothiriel when she came for inspection.

When Lothiriel got out of her bed the third day after their army left, she was still confident in their plan. Unfortunately, that would not last long.

The first crack in her confidence occurred shortly after noon as a result of a message from the White Mountains. According to the message, the Army of the Dead was passing through the region. Lothiriel first thought it was a panic story and put the message aside. Until her mother reminded her of a legend from the time of King Isildur in which an army of traitors was cursed after they violated an oath to the king. Since then, they were doomed to live out their days in a part of the White Mountains called the Path of the Dead. When Lothiriel finally discussed the news with her captains and Uncle Gojko, they concluded that it would be imprudent to evacuate the city, although they wondered if city walls could stop dead people. And whether, if fate was truly ill-served for them, they could fight on two fronts at once. In the end, Lothiriel circulated a message that it was up to each head of household to decide whether or not his family would remain in the city.

The second crack in her confidence came from a message from Elphir late that afternoon. He was about to leave the bay with the fleet and sail for the Anduin River where the pirates of Umbar had gathered. Along with other seafaring peoples from the South, they were ready to

sail down the river to Minas Tirith. It was confirmation of her father's suspicion that the pirates had joined Sauron and that he would send all his forces to the capital. Lothiriel, however, worried about Elphir, who, like her father, Erchirion and Tihomir, would now take an active part in the war. She worried for his wife and their infant son ... and for the loss of her first line of defense.

That evening she put on her doublet and her shirt of mail. With the help of Mirna, Tihomir's sister and also her chambermaid, she buckled her breast armor.

Tihomir's shining sea opal she wore under her shirt, close to her heart. Fully dressed and with her sword and helmet beside her, she laid herself to rest on her bed. She hardly slept that night.

The sun was not yet up when, after a knock at the door, she heard the news that not only her father, but also Elphir had been right. Umbar had kept a fleet behind and it now lay where only hours ago their own fleet had been; off the coast of Dol Amroth. Lothiriel ran up the stairs to the top floor of the citadel, where above the great hall was also the highest vantage point. From behind the battlements, she peered out at the dark waters. Through the patches of morning mist, she saw outlines of ships. They were not adorned with the familiar blue-silver banner of Dol Amroth. Their sails were darkly colored, and Lothiriel had no doubt that they would turn out to be black and red at daybreak. She saw chains glistening. "They are at anchor," she told the watch. "That gives us some time. Bring the captains and the harbor master to me, but be quiet. Don't sound the alarm yet."

A moment later, four additional pairs of eyes stared at the murky water. "Eight ships," Uncle Gojko said. "I suspect a thousand men, maybe more." Lothiriel swallowed. An excess of at least four against one. "They will be overconfident," Gojko said, "and think our defense is weak."

"That could play to our advantage," Lothiriel said. Truth eight from Sunju, she thought, 'Misguide the opponent in any way possible'. "We notify the citizens," she said, "in a calm and silent manner. Those who cannot or will not fight, take shelter in the great hall. Those who remain in their homes anyway, stay inside." She looked at the nodding faces. "Meanwhile, we take up our positions. Remember truth number eleven. Wait until the right time to attack. That may take some time because they only get past the barricades at high tide."

"That means they can only attack when the sun is already at its highest," Branimir said.

"And they can only get to the port or to the beach in small boats," said

Gojko. "They will come in waves, because they have to go back and forth with their sloops all the time."

"Wait to fire until they set foot ashore," Lothiriel told Bogdan. "On arrival, give them the impression that we are hardly defending ourselves. The surprise will be all the greater." She looked at the four men. "We can do this," she said. "We will overcome. We have practiced this and we are sticking to the plan. We are doing this for Dol Amroth, for its people and for the soldiers who left, so they can return to a safe haven. And even though we each fight with our own unit, we do this together." Unconsciously, she made Tihomir's motion. To her

surprise, it was copied four times. For a moment it seemed that Tihomir was with her, and she smiled.

After the departure of the four men, she sent messengers to the townspeople and to the surrounding plantations. She herself descended to the private quarters to wake her mother and grandmother.

“We will take care of the people in the great hall,” said Biljana, Lothiriel's mother, as she gathered the servants in the living room.

“Speak for yourself,” said Rhoswen who just walked into the room. Like Lothiriel, she was dressed in chain mail. From her belt hung a sword.

“Mother,” cried Biljana, “at your age you can't fight anymore.”

“At my age, you can mostly do what you want,” Rhoswen said. Stubbornly, she pushed her chin up. “Don't forget I still have an egg to fry with the men of Umbar.”

Lothiriel looked at her combative grandmother and wondered if she still had enough strength in her arms to wield the sword. “It is an honor to fight alongside you,” she finally said. “But get yourself a helmet and stay near the citadel, in other places you might get an arrow in your body.”

As soon as Elphir's wife and infant son also joined them, they left for the great hall. On the way, Mirna thrust a drawing into Lothiriel's hand. It was a portrait of Tihomir. Mirna, who did often draw portraits, had managed to capture his regular features well. From the drawing, he smiled at her. Gratefully, she squeezed Mirna's hand.

While the inhabitants gathered in the main hall, the city guards received their daily rations and took up their positions in various places around the city. Jarmil moved with his company to the city walls on the beach side. Branimir and Bogdan took their men to the port, and Goiko scattered his units in various locations between the port and the citadel. Lothiriel installed her men in strategic locations around the square in front of the citadel and herself took up post behind the battlements, from where she could keep an eye on the enemy. The waiting could begin.

II. The Battle of Dol Amroth

Slowly the sun rose and the fog dissipated. All the while the enemy ships lay motionless off the coast. During the morning, the sails were set and still later, small sloops sailed between the largest ships. Once it was sufficiently light, Lothiriel could see from her hiding place the activity on the deck of the largest ship. Several figures were watching and she suddenly realized that within a few hours she would be face to face with the enemy.

How could her life have taken such a huge turn in a matter of days, she wondered. Where were the days when she galloped carefree along the beach with Tihomir and Dragomir, or when they picked up shells in the sea? Where were the days when they only played they fought pirates? Unconsciously, she reached for Tihomir's sea opal. She snuck to the other side of the roof and looked down on the silent, deserted city for a while. In the neighborhood of weavers and tailors, the houses were overgrown with jasmine. Even now, at the end of winter, the numerous tendrils snaked around balconies and banisters. The mapmaker's house was still decorated with the flags from the wedding party that had taken place there last week. And in the garden behind the barracks stood the five-hundred-year-old olive tree under which Tihomir and she had first kissed. It had been an innocent experiment, but it had felt too good to continue as just friends afterward.

This was her home, filled with memories, Lothiriël thought. It was her job to defend it. Suddenly she thought of the words Amrothos had spoken before his departure. "Fleeing is not an option. You overcome, or die," he had said. She closed her eyes and wished she would overcome, and as many of her fellow townsmen and soldiers as possible along with her.

Restless, she again took up post behind the battlements. It was already nearing noon when a first sloop sailed toward the harbor. The pirates circled the sunken shipwrecks for a while and sailed back to the largest ship. Lothiriël sighed. The waiting was weighing her down. In an irrepressible impulse, she snuck toward the staircase that led to the great hall. But instead of opening the door to the hall, she stepped into her father's library and once again pondered the plan. As she went over all the points of defense, inside her anxiety grew. What if Jarmil's floating towers failed to catch fire or if Tihomir's stratagem with the ancient water reservoir failed? What unpredictable stratagems would the pirates themselves pull out of their sleeves? And what if the Army of Death also appeared at the city walls? More and more furiously her fingers slid over the plan until they reached the bay, where in reality the enemy was preparing to attack. She clawed at the parchment and crushed them with her hand. Swearing and ranting, she tried to tear them apart, but the parchment was tough and did not yield. "This will not be the end," she cried. "I will not flee. Even if there is no way back, I will stand my ground!"

Sobbing, she dropped to her knees. "I will stand my ground," she repeated, quieter this time. Her hand slid to where, under her shirt, sat Tihomir's thousand-year-old sea opal. She closed her eyes and imagined he was with her. He would gesture to her that they were doing this together. Or even better, he would take her in his arms and the quiet beating of his heart would soothe her. Still sobbing, she picked his portrait from under her doublet where it tore at the level of his shoulder. She smoothed it out and stared into his smiling eyes for a while. "If I should die today, know that I have loved you," she told him. She sniffed away her tears and tucked it back under her doublet. Then she stood up and straightened her shoulders. "I can do this," she said to herself. Only when she turned around did she see her standing there.

Grandma Rhoswen took Lothiriël in her arms and kissed her on the forehead. "When I was your age, I was already married," she said, "to the sweetest man I could wish for. A year later

I had Gojko. I was so happy.” Here Grandma Rhoswen stopped. A deep frown appeared on her forehead. “And then I was kidnapped,” she said, rather to herself. “In broad daylight.” Suddenly she looked at her granddaughter intensely. “They took me, but left my baby behind. I had never felt so bad in my life. And then that vile pirate who forced me ...” She recovered. “Well, I don’t have to explain it to you. It was terrible and I hope I meet him today. Then I’ll pierce him with my sword!” Fire flared up in Rhoswen’s eyes. Then she regained her composure and stroked Lothiriel’s hair. “I was afraid,” she said. “It was love for my husband and my child that gave me the courage to escape.” She looked at Lothiriel. “It is quite normal to be fearful of what awaits you. But as long as you feel love, you are not alone. Love makes you strong,” she said, patting Lothiriel on the chest.

Lothiriel kissed her grandmother on the cheek. “I’m ready,” she said. “We pierce them with our sword.”

“We pierce them with our sword,” her grandmother said. Together they climbed the stairs to the roof.

The city guard who had taken her place after Lothiriel left, turned toward them. “They’re coming,” he said.

From behind the battlement, Lothiriel saw about twenty sloops rowing toward the harbor mouth. She sent a messenger to the harbor shore to warn her captains. She herself climbed off the roof and crossed the deserted square toward the beach. On the way, some fellow citizens closed the last shutters, dogs and cats were brought inside, and an unnatural silence descended over the city.

From the roof of a bakery, well hidden from the eye of the pirates, Lothiriel gave the agreed signal to Captain Jarmil. She waited tensely until she saw the floating timber towers catch fire. Then she joined her uncle Gojko by stealth. The two of them discussed Tihomir’s ruse with the old water tank. “The water is not yet at its highest level,” Gojko said. “If we wait any longer, the reservoir will be filled to the brim. It’s now or never.”

“Then it is now,” Lothiriel said.

As she informed Branimir and Bogdan of their plans, the privateers slowly came rowing into the harbor. From her hiding place, Lothiriel saw archers taking their places, waiting for a signal from Captain Bogdan. It was still quiet, even the birds had stopped chirping.

Bogdan let the privateers come ashore. As their sloops turned right around, they carefully crept into the deserted harbor square. And then, almost as unexpectedly to Lothiriel as to the enemy, they heard the whizzing of arrows. Three salvos, in quick succession. The silence was broken by shouts and groans, and as soon as Branimir’s company advanced, also by the clanging of metal on metal. Fighting, Branimir drove the surviving pirates through a narrow street to the little square in front of the old water reservoir. There, all other access routes were closed off. The massive stone that closed the reservoir had been replaced by a wafer-thin hatch the day before. Because of the attack by Branimir’s men, the pirates could only go in one direction. With much cracking, the hatch splintered and at least ten privateers fell into the hole. The others were driven into the hole after which the stone was rolled back into place. Slowly their cries for help hushed and a moment later, except for some traces of blood, it seemed that no fight had taken place. Relieved, Lothiriel returned to the citadel. Not one townsman had fallen. Their plan seemed to be working.

The second cargo of pirates was larger. Lothiriel counted twenty-five sloops, and they were deep in the water. Everything would depend on Bogdan's archers she knew, and she sent a messenger to port.

Again Bogdan let the pirates come ashore. And again he waited to fire until they had all walked into the square. This time he had three salvos fired three times. But although Branimir had his entire company sent out to attack the surviving pirates, some managed to escape. Those were ambushed a few streets away by Gojko's men. Only a handful pushed through to the citadel where Lothiriel was waiting for them with her unit.

They were big, broad men who appeared at the top edge of the stairs, and they were heavily armed. Their hair hung in felty braids around their faces. Their gaze was cold and determined. Some had their faces and bare upper bodies painted with red marks. On the top staircase, they remained standing, looked at the city guards suspiciously and then began chanting war cries.

Lothiriel swallowed. She looked at the young city guard beside her. In his eyes she saw a reflection of her own fear, and spontaneously she too began to sing a battle song. The young city guard fell in. Then they each grabbed their swords and walked together toward the first pirate.

The third load of pirates soon followed. They were at least as numerous as the second. They reacted visibly surprised at the silence and apparent absence of combat. Bogdan again had three salvos fired, but the hesitation of the pirates left some behind at the mooring place. Branimir divided his company in two and sent one part to the port while the other half took on the pirates in the square. More and more pirates advanced to the upper parts of the city where Gojko and his men managed to stop many of them. Nevertheless, more than before arrived at the citadel square. Lothiriel, still full of adrenaline from the previous battle, struck, slashed and pierced the enemy with a fervor she had not thought possible that morning.

She was still panting when she returned to the port at Branimir's request. He stood on the quay near the corpses of some pirates. "If we had known we were fighting women, we would have spared them," Branimir said as he rolled over a corpse with his foot. Although the victim was heavily built and had equally felty braids than the pirates Lothiriel had seen so far, it was undeniably a woman.

Lothiriel looked puzzled, "Do you think she would have surrendered without violence?" she said.

Branimir frowned and weighed his answer. "I don't think so," he finally said.

After a brief hesitation, she sent for Azra. Azra, mistress of the bathhouse, had been born in Umbar but had come to Dol Amroth as a young woman. She was tall, broad and her curly hair was still as black as when she arrived more than fifty years ago. Despite her age, she had lost none of her fierceness. She joined Lothiriel and Branimir in full gear.

Lothiriel looked at her in surprise. "Do you intend to take up the sword against your own people?" she asked her.

"Without a doubt," Azra said. "Even though they were my own people, they treated me like a slave."

"Does that apply to the women, too?" said Lothiriel as she showed Azra the corpse.

Azra didn't budge. "Don't be swayed by the fact that it's a woman," she said. "Pirates fear the presence of women on their ships. The few who are admitted anyway are the meanest. To stand their ground in the cruel male world of Umbar, they have sacrificed their compassion and gentleness." She looked fiercely at Lothiriel and shook her head. "Every pirate who sets foot here has only one goal. And that is to plunder, hijack and kill."

Branimir swallowed. "Would you say the same to my men? They, like me, have their doubts about that."

A fourth cargo of pirates was already sailing into the harbor while Lothiriel and Azra were still addressing Branimir's men. The two women hurried to the citadel to retake their positions. They had barely left the harbor square when they already heard the whizzing of arrows and a moment later the clash of swords. On the way, Lothiriel gestured to Gojko to set fire to the barricades. Azra no longer left Lothiriel's side and, together with Grandma Rhoswen, took on several pirates.

This time the man-to-man fighting lasted longer than in the previous attacks. The sun was already descending as they carried the fallen to the barracks. Lothiriel climbed onto the roof of the bakery from where she had a view of the situation on the beach. Two smaller ships had sailed through to just off the beach. And although the wooden towers were still burning, behind the barricades several sloops were already ready to come ashore.

"I have an idea," said Azra who suddenly stood beside her.

"How did you get here?" asked Lothiriel in surprise.

Azra smiled and pointed to the hatch in the harp builder's roof. "You're not the only one who knows the shortcuts." From beneath the half-opened hatch, two white eyes stared in Lothiriel's direction.

"Lord Salvi," said Lothiriel, "the coast is not yet safe. It is better to stay inside for a while longer."

"Do I hear Lothiriel's voice there," the blind man asked.

Despite the situation, she laughed. "Yes, I am. But, like I said ..."

"Have you been practicing playing your harp the last few days?" interrupted Salvi.

"I unfortunately didn't have time for that," Lothiriel said apologetically.

"Feel free to kick the pirates' ass, but as soon as this madness is over I expect you back for your harp lessons," Salvi said sternly. His head disappeared and the hatch slammed shut.

Despite the situation, Lothiriel laughed.

Azra also shrugged her shoulders, smiling. "He was sweet enough to let me climb through his hatch," she said. "Come along, I want to show you something." She took Lothiriel a way down and showed her from the roof of the bookbinder a steep alley with worn, old stones. "As long as I've lived in Dol Amroth, I've fallen here at least once every year," Azra said. "Even in dry weather you won't stay up here. We'll send the pirates here and finish them off from this roof with bow and arrow."

"Good plan," said Lothiriel, "but unfortunately all archers are needed at the port and soon at the beach."

"I can handle a bow quite well," Azra said. "Just like the other women in the woman's archery club."

Lothiriël looked at her in surprise. "I didn't even know Dol Amroth had such a club."

While Azra returned to the citadel, Lothiriël walked over to Gojko to explain the plan. Not much later, about thirty women, dressed in mail and armed with bows and arrows, appeared on the roof of the bookbinder.

As the sun set, it grew darker, and the cool sea air gave way to a waft of smoke mixed with the smell of sweat and blood. The pirates drove up the pace of their attacks, sending smaller groups but at a faster pace into the city. Whenever she had a moment, Lothiriël ran to the lookout on the citadel to keep an overview of the battle.

The darkness played to both their advantage and disadvantage. The archers were able to get closer to the enemy, but the pirates managed to hide better in the many nooks and crannies of the city, making it harder for the archers to see them. The fighting in the streets was more chaotic and claimed more casualties on their part. At various points in the city, the shouts of people and the clanging of swords sounded. In the garden behind the barracks, the five-hundred-year-old olive tree burned. Although the enemy was still moving slowly zigzagging through the city, the increased pace of attacks meant there was hardly time to rest. Fatigue began to set in. More and more pirates penetrated as far as the citadel, and Lothiriël's units were now fighting in unison. Since they were the last barrier between the enemy and the numerous women and children in the great hall, they had to stand their ground. There was no more time to evacuate the wounded, let alone take away the fallen.

Clouds slid in front of the moon, it began to rain softly, and in the square in front of the citadel the victims continued to pile up. Unfortunately, in addition to dead pirates, more and more dead city guards lay there. On the steps to the square, Lothiriël saw the body of the young city guard with whom she had carried out the first attack. If possible, he was even younger than herself. The blood from his abdominal wound mixed with the rain and ran down the steps in a trickle. She cried without noticing.

A messenger from Captain Jarmil came to report that the floating towers on the beach were beginning to extinguish and she sent him to Bogdan by stealth. She herself walked on to the city wall where she found Jarmil at the steps to the bathhouse. Bogdan's archers had barely taken up their positions when the first pirates walked onto the beach. Jarmil had not joined the battle for now. He was still full of courage and he laughed when the pirates got stuck in the obstacles on and behind the beach.

Lothiriël wished she could share his optimism. As it rained harder and harder, she climbed back to the citadel through the roofs and shutters. She stopped for a moment on the roof of the clothmakers' hall. Downtown barricades were also beginning to go out. In the distance, Azra walked hastily across the rooftops, surrounded by her own unit of archers. In thought, Lothiriël went over the plan, but for now she saw no way to turn their luck around. Even if Jarmil could slow the enemy's advance along the beach, sooner or later they would enter the city and have to be eliminated in street battles.

Meanwhile, on the beach side, the first pirates reached the city wall. The stairway to the bathhouse was defended by archers; anything else that got through there was at the mercy of Jarmil's men. And they did not show much mercy. Of all the soldiers, they were still the fittest. They beat and hacked away, and the mosaic-decorated square was soon littered with corpses. The pirates they failed to capture, they chased along the barricades to the narrow streets of the inner city where Gojko's units awaited them. Like Branimir's men, they chased the enemy into cul-de-sacs or squares where, in addition to Bogdan's men, now Azra's women took them under fire. Pirates who still got through there were stopped by Lothiriel and her unit. It was a good plan and they had executed it well, but the continuing supply of new attackers was taking its toll.

Lothiriel had just knocked down a female pirate when her fears became reality. From the citadel square she saw him fall. Uncle Gojko had engaged in a fight on the rampart. Among all the cries, she suddenly recognized his voice, one last time ... And then, along with his attacker, he fell over the edge into the foaming sea. Lothiriel did not have time to process what she had seen, for another opponent was already imposing itself on her.

The darkness and heavy rain made it impossible for the archers to do their work any longer. Bogdan sent word that his units, except those on the beach side, were proceeding to man-to-man combat.

Gojko's units fought bravely on even without his leadership, but like Lothiriel's men, they were considerably thinned out and tired. What just didn't seem to thin out was the flood of pirates. With growing despair, Lothiriel looked at her city smoking in several places and pirates filling the streets with corpses. "Fleeing is not an option. You overcome, or die," she heard Amrothos say again. "Then I will overcome," she said to herself. Stubbornly, she clamped her jaws together. At that moment, seemingly out of nowhere, a pirate came crawling over the outer wall of the citadel. Beside him, a large grappling hook had punched a hole in the solid wall. He must have climbed dozens of meters up the cliffs. Full of disbelief, Lothiriel looked at him. The pirate looked back. "You I'd rather have alive," he grinned in the language of Umbar. "Over my dead body," Grandma Rhoswen screamed. Swinging her sword, she came running from behind Lothiriel.

The man was startled, drew his sword and managed to fend off Rhoswen's blow just in time. Groaning with frustration, Lothiriel also tackled him. With two opponents, each attacking him from a different side, he did not manage to hold out for long.

"Bastard," Grandma Rhoswen screamed as she gave him the final blow, "you stay away from my granddaughter." Panting, she looked at Lothiriel. "A little language skills always come in handy."

Another pirate meanwhile came climbing over the wall via the grappling hook, and Lothiriel called some of her men to her and ordered the others to stand firm before the great gate. She herself walked to the grappling hook and cleaved the rope with a few brisk strokes. "Much better," she said to herself when she heard from the screams that not only the rope, but several pirates fell to their deaths.

By now it was well past midnight and Lothiriel was exhausted. Her arms were trembling with fatigue and her movements were anything but coordinated. She watched her grandmother

fight on bravely, though like Lothiriel she could barely raise her sword. It seemed almost impossible that Umbar's ships had carried so many men. Every time she thought the attack was over, new pirates came storming up the steps to the citadel.

Lothiriel now held her sword with both hands and warded off a blow from an exceptionally large pirate. He had dyed his bald head red in addition to his face and laughed foully as his next blow staggered her. A third blow hit her right arm just above the elbow. The blade of his sword cleaved through her skin into her muscles and her sword fell from her hands. Horrified, Lothiriel looked at the pirate who braced himself to give her a final blow. "Never," she shouted, and with one last vestige of energy she grabbed the dagger from her belt, slid across the smooth stones between his legs and plunged the weapon deep into his thigh. The man fell down. Lothiriel grabbed her sword with her left hand and pushed it with her full weight through his leather tunic into his belly. "Never do I surrender," she hissed as she withdrew her weapon.

Only then did she notice the new faces beside her. She recognized her mother, Damirah, Mirna and many other women. They had dressed in mail as best they could, had distributed all the weapons the citadel still had, and had come to assist their soldiers in their last hour. Lothiriel laughed and cried at the same time.

The nearness of her mother gave her new energy and calling out, she ran toward yet another pirate when she saw Grandma Rhoswen go through her knees. A pirate stood over the old woman with sword raised. Lothiriel changed direction and went at him screaming and mowing with her sword. Despite now fighting with her less practiced left arm, she kept hacking at him even when he had already fallen. Behind her, her mother and several other women took care of Rhoswen. Ferociously, Lothiriel continued to lash out ... until no new pirates joined her.

Amazed, she looked at the empty staircase that led to the square. The soldiers around her began to take care of the wounded, and women came running out of the great hall to help them. As if in a dream, Lothiriel climbed the stairs to the roof of the citadel. She saw no more sloops on the water. She saw no more movement in the harbor.

The boarding hook and the piece of rope dangled empty against the wall of the citadel. From the direction of the beach, she saw a single pirate walk into town, but he was met a little further on by Gojko's soldiers. Azra and her women came walking into the square. On their faces she read weariness, sadness, but also relief.

Could it be, Lothiriel thought, could it be that the battle was over?

Lothiriel walked into the great hall and looked in amazement at the wounded. "The house of healing is full," Damirah said as she bandaged Lothiriel's arm. "Rhoswen is over there." She nodded her head toward a corner of the hall.

Both her mother and Azra were on their knees beside the old woman. They were crying. Lothiriel knelt beside her mother. From her makeshift bed, Rhoswen smiled at her, but Lothiriel had her eyes mostly on the blood-soaked cloth lying on her chest. She lifted it and saw air bubbles in the fresh blood from the wound. Grandma Rhoswen's lungs had been hit. Rhoswen grabbed Lothiriel's hand. "We pierced them with our sword," she said. Lothiriel's

throat was clogged with tears. She smiled shakily at her grandmother and squeezed her hand gently. With her other hand, she patted her chest twice.

Barely visible, Rhoswen nodded. "I love you, too," she said. "Remember that love gives strength. Never be afraid to love." Lothiriel kissed her grandmother's wrinkled hand. It felt cold and limp. "Give the boys a kiss from me," Rhoswen said to Biljana now. "Especially Erchirion, I thought of him often today."

Suddenly Lothiriel thought of uncle Gojko. She could not possibly tell her grandmother now that her son had died. She stood up and asked a young girl to fetch Captain Branimir.

"I am very grateful to you," Rhoswen, meanwhile, said to Azra. "You stood with me in my darkest hours."

Azra stroked Rhoswen's gray hair. "And you gave me back my softness when I almost lost it," she said. "Your coming to Umbar was the best thing that ever happened to me."

A trickle of blood ran down the corner of Rhoswen's mouth. Azra wiped it away.

"I would have liked to say goodbye to Branimir," Rhoswen said, "before I join his father." Lothiriel looked at her grandmother startled. "Oh, I know he fell," her grandmother said. "I felt it."

Biljana looked at her daughter. "Is Gojko dead," she asked. Lothiriel nodded and suddenly all the grief came out at once. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she wrapped her arms around her mother's shaking shoulders.

Branimir came and Lothiriel made room so that he too could say goodbye to his grandmother.

Only after Rhoswen drew her last breath did Lothiriel tell her cousin about his father's death. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I wish I could have prevented it."

Branimir sniffed away his tears. "Father always gave one hundred percent," he said, "in everything he did. I will miss him." He walked toward the large door, but turned around after a few steps. "I suspect his position is now vacant," he said. Lothiriel nodded. "I would like to succeed him," he said.

"I think that can be arranged," she said, smiling. "But I'd like to keep you on as captain for a while longer. Our work is not quite finished." At that moment, Captain Jarmil was carried in, both legs bandaged.

As soon as it was light, Lothiriel and her captains left behind the still smoldering, war-soiled city and rowed toward the pirates' ships. Those were still anchored in the bay. Captain Jarmil stayed behind, as he had two broken legs. He had suffered these not during the battle, but afterwards, when in his euphoria he had jumped from the balcony of the bathhouse. The captains took the fittest men. They rowed first to the two ships anchored on the beach. As they approached the first ship and expressed their intentions, a rope ladder was lowered. On board, they found only unarmed compatriots, kidnapped and enslaved in the months before. They also found slaves in the other ships, further out in the bay. Only on the largest ship did they find pirates, listless and barely able to fight. The pirates were thrown overboard; the compatriots were housed in the plantations outside the city. As long as war was raging, it did not seem wise to Lothiriel to send them home. As long as war raged, she could not let down

her guard. She wondered what had become of the Army of the Dead and, to be on the safe side, had the guard doubled and maintained barricades in the harbor and town.

Outside the city, she had a large burial pit dug for the pirates. Two days after the attack, they filled the pit with corpses. The whole town came to help. The children sowed flowers on it while their parents sang victory songs. They said goodbye to their own deceased two days later. All day, fires burned around the town in which they cremated their fallen. All day, families sailed in and out of the bay to scatter ashes of their loved ones into the sea according to their tradition. Grandma Rhoswen and Uncle Gojko were also cremated. Lothiriel, Biljana and Branimir scattered them together and said goodbye while singing.

“Should I have forbidden Grandma Rhoswen to join the fight,” Lothiriel asked her mother that night.

Biljana shook her head. “No,” she said. “Whether you had forbidden her or not, your grandmother had fought along anyway. She still had, as she herself said, something to settle with the pirates.” Biljana stroked Lothiriel's hair. “There was a reason she never spoke of her captivity in Umbar.”

“I know,” Lothiriel said. “She was abused. Just like some of the women we found on their ships.” Biljana looked at her in surprise. “They told about it. Poor Branimir was all upset.” Lothiriel swallowed. “I had in my sloop two girls, no older than Mirna, who were so ashamed they don't dare to go home.” She sniffed away her tears. “Like it's all their fault!”

Biljana wrapped her arms around her daughter. “I don't think only Branimir is upset,” she said. “What makes people do such terrible things to each other,” Lothiriel said.

“Power, I think,” Biljana said. “Not everyone sees power as a responsibility. When power ends up in the wrong hands, the weakest in society are the first to pay the bill.”

“But what motivates women to get behind such power plays?” said Lothiriel.

Biljana shrugged. “I think they felt forced to choose between the role of victim or perpetrator.”

“I hope I will never be faced with such a choice,” Lothiriel said. “I hate having to wait for the enemy to arrive at the gate, but I hate even more having to kill others to protect myself and others from their wickedness.”

“Where are the girls now?” said Biljana.

“At the lemon plantation. The farm family there has daughters of the same age,” Lothiriel said.

“Hopefully they will find friendship and trust there. They are from a village on the seaweed beaches and I plan to bring them home after the war myself.”

Biljana looked at her smiling. “Have I already told you how proud I am of you,” she said. “Who knows what would have happened to us had you not been able to stand your ground?”

Then she sighed. “Now we only have to wait until the war is actually over. And we can only hope that our men and sons hold out as well.” She grasped Lothiriel's hand. “I hope we get news from Minas Tirith soon.”

Later that evening, all the townspeople gathered around a large fire on the beach. They shared flatbreads, cheese and dried fruit with each other. Lothiriel and Biljana had several barrels of wine lit and the entire town raised a toast to victory. In their speech, the two women expressed their sympathy for the deceased, thanked the soldiers and all the other residents for their help and emphasized that the war, unfortunately, was not over.

What they did not know was that that same day many more were killed in the battle of the fields of Pelennor. And while the captains of Gondor desperately deliberated at the foot of Minas Tirith, the inhabitants of Dol Amroth already sang the praises of all their departed heroes.



PART 2

III. A bittersweet reunion

From the roof of the citadel, Lothriel gazed out to sea. The pirates' ships had been off the city for more than two weeks now. Lothriel had had them emptied, but until she received word that the war was over, she retained the blockades and they could not be towed into port. They were well-built ships. And with some modifications, they could be added to Dol Amroth's fleet. She hoped to get word from her brother Elphir or her father from Minas Tirith soon.

The only news she had received since they left had been more than ten days old. It had not been hopeful news. They had won a major battle, but were forced to confront Sauron on his

own turf. She had immediately returned a message with a brief account of the attack on the city and the regrettable news that Grandma Rhoswen and Uncle Gojko had perished. Their loss was still fresh, and in addition to the grief was the fear of the Army of the Dead. Although Lothiriël had not heard from them since that one rumor, shortly before the attack, she did not rule out the possibility that Sauron also controlled the dead. Unconsciously, she played with Tihomir's sea opal that still hung on a chain around her neck. Every day she hoped that he, like her father and her brothers, would come home safe.

She turned and looked down on the city. Except for the barricades, there was hardly a trace of the fighting left. The streets were polished clean, as were the colorful mosaics in the squares, and the five-hundred-year-old olive tree, despite its fire injuries, appeared to still possess life. The bakers were baking bread again, the seaweed baths were filled again, and Lothiriël had resumed her harp lessons with Lord Salvi. Life seemed to go on as usual.

That may have been true on the surface, Lothiriël thought as she stretched her injured arm, but deep down, much had changed. Much of what used to be taken for granted eventually proved to have a price. To preserve their city, they had had to sacrifice much more than just some old ships and a tree. For even though they had won the attack, their losses were great. Too great, Lothiriël thought. She was convinced that a more experienced leader would have made better decisions that would have resulted in fewer casualties.

She saw her mother along with Azra coming up the stairs to Citadel Square and waved. After one last glance at the sea, she walked toward them. Halfway down the stairs to the main hall, however, she turned around. Surely there were only eight ships in the bay? From behind the battlements, she now counted nine. She called the guard. The ninth ship slowly approached. Only after some time could they distinguish the banner. "Blue with silver," cried the guard enthusiastically. "It is blue with silver!"

Lothiriël now also recognized the shape of the ship. "It's Elphir," she said. "It's his ship."

Meanwhile, Elphir's ship reduced speed and at a distance from the other ships threw out its anchor.

"Why doesn't he come closer?" the guard said.

"Perhaps he fears a ruse," Lothiriël said. "After all, there are eight pirate ships in front of the city."

"But the flag is raised. Surely he must see our flag," the guard said. His voice echoed the impatience Lothiriël felt. "Wait," he said suddenly. "Perhaps it is a ruse of the pirates!"

Lothiriël looked at the young guard. "A ruse with one ship?"

"Maybe more are on the way," he said.

"No, I really think it's him," she said. "Elphir would never give up his ship." Nevertheless, she hesitated. "Very well," she said, "have our new harbor master prepare a sloop. We'll go and investigate." She herself walked to the great hall to inform her mother.

Although Lothiriël had been sure of herself when they left, her unease grew as they approached the ship. She looked at Branimir, who looked equally tense. He passed his oars to the city guard beside him and crept to the bow of the sloop. The ship seemed deserted at first glance.

"Ahoi, ahoi," shouted Branimir as soon as they were sufficiently close. "Friend or foe? Make yourself known." Behind her back, Lothiriël crossed her fingers.

"That depends on who's asking the question," a voice called out. "Dol Amroth or Umbar?"

"Dol Amroth," cried Branimir.

Suddenly, as many as twenty heads appeared above the edge. They laughed and cheered. "It's safe," they cried. "It's safe!" and they fell into each other's arms.

"Hello brother," Lothiriel called out as soon as she recognized Elphir among the faces. "I'm glad to see you." Elphir waved, but even from the sloop Lothiriel could see that he was crying with relief.

That evening, Elphir was united with his wife and child. "It was terrible," he said. "And after all the misery, I thought I would find an enemy here as well." He hugged his infant son. "I feared everything had been for nothing." He told of the Army of Death which, spurred on by some king, had overcome the enemy fleet.

"So the Army of Death fought for us," Lothiriel said.

Elphir nodded. "King Elessar, as Isildur's heir, could impose his will on it."

Lothiriel felt her eyes roll out of their sockets. "I thought it was an enemy," she said. "And this King Elessar, where did he come from so suddenly?"

"From the North," Elphir said, "where Isildur's descendants retreated eras ago." He saw the disbelief in Lothiriel's eyes. "Sister, once you meet him, you will believe me. He is a king such as you have never seen."

Elphir told of their journey across the river and how they arrived in Minas Tirith only just in time to help stem the tide. He told of the battle in the fields outside the city, the numerous casualties, including uncle Denethor. About cousin Faramir who had been wounded, but in the meantime had taken up his father's position. But he also told of orcs, trolls, dragons and great beasts. "And then we thought it was over," he said, "that the war was won." He shook his head. "Apparently Sauron had kept at least as many troops behind and the captains decided to challenge him." He told of the journey to the Morannon, the black gateway to Mordor. About the despair of the soldiers and his own despair. How their brother Amrothos had begged his father and their new king not to have to take part in that final battle. "After that battle I wanted only one thing," he said, "to come home, to my wife and my child."

There was so much love in his eyes that Lothiriel spontaneously touched the sea opal on her chest.

"Father will stay with the troops in the tent camp in Itilien for some time," she heard her brother say.

Lothiriel looked at him in surprise. "Why?" she said. "Why doesn't he come home like you?"

"In a few weeks King Elessar will be crowned," he said. "Father and he have much to discuss. Besides, the men need time to recover from their experience ... and from the losses they have suffered."

"What losses," Lothiriel said alarmed. "What losses," she asked again.

"No one from the family," Elphir said. Lothiriel noticed his reticence.

"Tihomir?" Her voice sounded thin. Elphir was startled by it.

"He's alive," he said. "But he's wounded. Father thinks it would do him good to see you. You, Damirah and Mirna. And mother has to come along, too, of course." He looked at Biljana. "Father misses you."

The rest of the conversation completely eluded Lothiriel. In her mind, she was already packing. "When do we leave," she said as she straightened up.

"As soon as possible," Elphir said. "But you go without me. I'm staying here." Lothiriel was already on her way to her room.

Despite her impatience to leave, Lothiriel still had to wait until Elphir's ship was loaded with supplies from the city's richly stocked cellars. Since the blockade of the harbor had not yet been cleared, the supplies had to be carried by small sloops all the way to the bay. By order of his father, Elphir had grain, wine, lemons, oranges, dried fruits and nuts brought to the ship. Tents, blankets and cooking utensils were also brought aboard. Lothiriel, who supervised at the port, even saw Azra hauling baskets of dried seaweed.

"Does this have to come along, too?" she 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?" said Lothiriel 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 harbor."

Azra had barely left when Lord Salvi walked into the harbor, followed by his sons. Prince Imrahil had asked them to provide music at King Elessar's coronation feast. With rising amazement, Lothiriel helped them load the harps, drums and fiddles into a sloop. It seemed as if her father was sending the entire city to Minas Tirith.

By nightfall, the ship's hold was full. And although it would set sail early in the morning the next day, the entire crew took part in the victory celebration that Elphir had ordered. It became a frenzied feast of drink, music and dancing, with people relieved and laughing. Despite her concern for Tihomir, Lothiriel thoroughly enjoyed herself. The war was over. Sauron had been defeated. Life smiled upon her.

Although Lothiriel had started training with the fleet several years ago, it had quickly become clear to everyone that neither her navigational skills nor her seaman's legs lent themselves to a life at sea. Fortunately, the ship now taking them to Itilien was equipped with a more talented crew. And now that she was relieved of any duties on board, Lothiriel spent most of her days on deck enjoying the view and the company of the musicians and the other ladies.

But aboard the ship, time slipped by but slowly, and since they had sailed up the Anduin River that morning, Lothiriel looked forward to their stopover at the port of Minas Tirith.

Elphir had told that both their uncle Denethor and cousin Boromir had not survived the war. Not that Lothiriel had been very close to them. On the contrary, as a child they had rather

terrified her. She thought back to that one time, shortly before her eighth birthday, when her uncle and cousins had come to visit for a very specific reason.

She had played on the beach all day and Erchirion had come to pick her up, after which she was washed and dressed in her finest dress and her hair sprinkled with lavender water.

"Is there a party?", she asked. Her mother looked at her smiling, but a frown appeared on her forehead. Lothiriel rubbed it away and gave her mother a kiss.

"You're a sweetheart," her mother said. "I love you."

When they joined the company in the living room, everyone looked at her. Lothiriel gulped. Unlike otherwise, uncle Denethor looked friendly, as did cousin Faramir, though he usually looked friendly. But it was cousin Boromir who made Lothiriel reach for her mother's hand. He looked at her as her father looked at a newly purchased horse. Then he shook his head laughing. "She's still a child," he said, turning to his father. "This is ridiculous." He nodded to the servant who had just entered the room. "I'd rather have one night with her than have to wait another ten years until my bride is old enough to marry."

Uncle Denethor pursed his lips and sighed deeply. Lothiriel felt like everyone in the room was holding their breath. Frightened, she looked at her mother who squeezed her hand. "Good," Uncle Denethor finally said. "It was worth a try. The deal is off. My son will not marry Lothiriel." Lothiriel drew big eyes and on her face slowly appeared a look full of horror. "I don't want to marry," she said. "I don't want to kiss cousin Boromir." Uncle Denethor's eyebrows shot up, her father closed his eyes and everyone else burst into laughter. Lothiriel felt her mother's hand relax.

Only her youngest brother Amrothos looked sour. "Isn't Lothiriel going to Minas Tirith after all?" he asked.

With a snort, both Lothiriel's mother and her grandmother turned their heads to her father, who bit his lip guiltily.

In the weeks that followed, her mother and grandmother had refused to speak a single word to her father. She had later been told that they had been unaware either of the marriage agreement or of the plan to move Lothiriel to Minas Tirith. Her father had only managed to save his marriage by promising his wife and her mother that Lothiriel would eventually have the final say as far as her marriage was concerned. Which did not prevent him from regularly introducing her in recent years to candidates he considered suitable. Unfortunately, Tihomir was not one of them. The incident had been kept quiet ever since. When it did come up, her father would talk about 'that fiasco years ago'.

Oddly enough, her cousin Boromir had never married. According to her mother, he had never been interested in marriage and it had suited him well that the age difference with Lothiriel had been so great. Meanwhile, Lothiriel was well aware that he had saved them both much misery, though she had never thanked him for it.

Two days later, from the deck, Lothiriel was studying the banks sliding by. The left bank was flat as far as the eye could see. The right bank was dense with trees and shrubs with the

foothills of the shadow mountains beyond. She shuddered. She had never sailed so far up the Anduin River and she had never been so close to Mordor. Now that she was in the shadow of Sauron's realm, she felt her attention sharpen again. However, it was safe now. Elphir had said that with the defeat of Sauron, as if by magic, all his dark creations had also disappeared. Lothiriel would understand better once she met the hobbits. Hobbits, orks, trolls ... for Lothiriel it was beyond comprehension.

Their ship had made a stop in the port of Minas Tirith the night before. Cousin Faramir, now Steward of Gondor, had tried to explain it in turn, but it kept sounding like sorcery. Had she not seen the rotting carcasses of giant mûmakils with her own eyes and smelled them with her own nose, she would not have believed him.

More supplies had been brought aboard this morning so that now even the deck was full of barrels, baskets and bags. Lord Salvi and his sons remained in Minas Tirith; they preferred the pleasures of the city, they said. Lothiriel, on the other hand, was looking forward to living in the open for a while, especially now that Elphir, in the rush of victory, had lent her his own luxurious tent.

"I can't wait to see Tihomir," said Mirna, who was sitting next to her on a barrel. Lothiriel gently touched the sea opal. She, too, wished to see him. She wanted to tell him how they had executed their defense plan, where the bottlenecks had been and where they had been successful. She was curious about his adventures, his stories and wondered if he had managed to make a good impression on her father. Meanwhile, on the right bank, the first tents appeared among the trees. "We're here," she laughed. "We're here!" She fell into Mirna's arms.

Their arrival was also noticed on the shore. More and more soldiers appeared on the waterfront. They waved and shouted, "Dol Amroth! Amroth is coming!" Lothiriel waved back. "It is Lady Lothiriel," some of the men shouted. Suddenly she felt simultaneously proud and nervous. She removed her arm from its sling and smoothed her uniform.

As the ship slowed, she thought about her father. Was he, as Elphir claimed, truly satisfied with her work? Or did he share her doubt that a better captain would have suffered fewer casualties?

As the ship docked, the group of soldiers on the shore grew. The city guards of Dol Amroth had gathered in front. As soon as Lothiriel stepped onto the gangway, they scanned her name. Captain Goran was the first to wait for her. He looked at her proudly. "I knew you would make it," he said, pulling her against his massive chest.

"I had a good teacher," Lothiriel said, smiling. As soon as the captain released her, there were others who wanted to greet her, shake her hand and hug her. She had lost Mirna for some time when she joined Dragomir.

Plumes of gray smoke over the city, screams, shouts and the sound of clanging swords, the woeful smell of sweat and blood ... Uncle Gojko tumbling over the city wall. It all came back. "I'm so sorry," she said.

Dragomir appreciatively placed his hand on her shoulder. "Knowing father, he was in the front line," he said.

Lothiriel nodded. "He was a brave man. Without him, we wouldn't have made it."

"And the others?" he said.

"Branimir is unharmed. But Grandma Rhoswen fell in battle ... after taking down at least ten opponents."

Drogomir squeezed her shoulder appreciatively. "She was a heroine," he said. "Just like you." Lothiriel shook her head in denial. She felt anything but a heroine. "Victory belongs to all of us," she said. "Where is Tihomir?"

A slight cough made them look up. Her father had approached them unnoticed, and he was not alone.

Beside him stood two unknown 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. King Elessar perhaps, Lothiriel thought. She bowed.

"My daughter," Prince Imrahil said, looking at her thoughtfully. In his eyes, Lothiriel saw a reflection of herself. It was not the unruly girl of old standing before her father. Through his eyes she was looking at a young woman whose smile did not extend beyond her mouth. "My daughter," he said again, and he, too, placed his hand on her shoulder. Lothiriel felt how this unexpected gesture of appreciation threatened to break the dam holding back her tears. She swallowed. "My lord," she said. "Dol Amroth is safe. Captain Lothiriel requests leave."

"You've earned that leave," he said. "I only expect a report from you tonight at dinner. 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, "though until his coronation he prefers to be called Aragorn." For a moment, Lothiriel looked at King Elessar in amazement. Was this the great monarch her brother had told her about? Then she saw strength in his eyes and an unyielding will, and she understood what Elphir had meant. She 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 has told me about you," she said. "It is an honor to meet you."

"We'll have dinner together tonight," her father said. "But now I'll let you go. I see there are others who wish to greet you."

Lothiriel heard someone calling her name. She turned and saw Erchirion coming toward her from the distance. He was accompanied by fellow townspeople and strange men with hair and beards the same color as her horse's mane. Erchirion shot forward like a spear from the group. Lothiriel ran toward him, faster and faster, relieved to see him, relieved that he was unharmed and knowing that, now that he was there, everything would be all right. The dam that had kept her straight all this time broke. Tears ran down her cheeks as she threw herself with a tiger's leap into her big brother's arms.

"Tell me," she said after he squeezed out her tears. "Where is Tihomir? Why doesn't he come to greet me?"

Erchirion let her down. "Dear sister," he said, "has no one told you ... I'm so sorry."

His hesitation made the blood in her veins curdle. "No," she said in a compelling voice. "He is alive. He is wounded, but Elphir has assured me he is alive."

Erchirion looked at her with concern. "He's alive," he said. "But there is little hope."

"No!" said Lothiriel again. "Where is he? Please, take me to him."

He led her to a spacious tent where she found Mirna and Damirah. They stood defeated beside one of the beds. Lothiriel hesitated, suddenly afraid of what she would see. Erchirion gently pushed her forward. When she finally stood beside him, she barely recognized him. Tihomir's slim, sturdy body seemed shrunken. His cheeks were sunken in and his eyes were cloudy and deep in their sockets. But what touched her most deeply was the thick bandage covering the stump of what had once been his right arm. Her lip trembled. Hesitantly, she patted her chest twice with her right fist. "I love you," she said. He smiled and laboriously copied her movement with his left hand.

"I'm glad you're here," he gestured.

"I should have been here a long time ago," she said with a sob. She slipped the sea opal around his neck and kissed his clammy forehead. "You still have one arm," she said as she pushed back her tears and nodded to him encouragingly. "We'll get there. We can do this. Together we can do anything." Gently, she laid her head against his, and she sat like that until he fell asleep.

Erchirion and Prince Imrahil stood watching the scene from a distance. "We have to tell her," Erchirion said.

The prince nodded. "Give her time to enjoy her triumph first."

"On that subject, I must tell you something," Erchirion said. "Something came to my attention just now about Amrothos that you won't be happy about."

Prince Imrahil frowned. "The presence of those female pirates worries me," he said. "The desire to conquer Dol Amroth must be great if Umbar is also sending his women into battle." Aragorn nodded thoughtfully. "It would not surprise me at all had Dol Amroth been the prize Sauron had promised the pirates."

"Though they would always remain indebted to him. Sauron would never have given away any part of his newfound empire," Gandalf said. "And certainly not a city like Dol Amroth."

The three men had listened intently to Lothiriel's story and now looked at each other thoughtfully.

"I never believe it stops here," Aragorn said after a while. "Even without Sauron, people in Umbar long for fertile land. Their city is surrounded by an arid landscape with few opportunities for agriculture." He shook his head. "I fear victory over the pirates is only temporary."

Lothiriel drew wide eyes. "Then our battle was futile?" she said. "Did our citizens fall for nothing?"

"It was not useless," Aragorn said as he placed his hand on her arm. "You have secured Dol Amroth. For now." He looked at her appreciatively. "And that is no small thing for a young woman like you. But we must not rest on our laurels. We must remain vigilant and prepare for a battle that has not yet been fought."

Despite his compliment, Lothiriel lowered her shoulders. "How many more must die," she wondered aloud. "How can we defend ourselves against such an enemy? Is there no way to negotiate?"

Aragorn sighed. "I wish nothing more than that," he said. "But the hatred of Umbar toward Gondor is so old that there is little to no room for conversation."

"You told me the pirates looked different from the old reports," Gandalf said.

Lothiriel nodded. "Some looked like in Grandma Rhoswen's story," she said, "tall, slim and with dark curls. But most were broadly built with a short neck, felty braids and small eyes that were close together. Although they spoke the language of Umbar, it occurred to me that they were from another country."

"In that case, it may well be that there has been a change of power in Umbar since you defeated their port captain," Gandalf said, looking at Aragorn. "As often happens in a realm where the law of the jungle prevails."

Lothiriel looked at Aragorn in surprise. "Were you at the attack on Umbar at the time?" she said.

Gandalf laughed. "Aragorn led the attack on Umbar," he said.

Confused, Lothiriel looked from the wizard to the king. "I thought Thorongil led the attack, he killed the port captain, set fire to their ships and ... disappeared," she said, to which Gandalf nodded affirmatively and Aragorn gave the wizard a reprimanding look.

It was still early when Lothiriel opened the flaps of her tent. The fog still hung between the trees and the grass under her feet was wet and cold. She walked to her parents' tent that stood only a few meters away. Despite the humidity, the guards had managed to keep the fire burning in front of the tent. She tied her scarf around her shoulders and sat down. Basking in the warmth of the fire, she thought about the night before. She reflected on the words of Aragorn, who feared that as long as Umbar was in the hands of pirates, the shores of South Gondor would never be completely safe. It was a sad prospect that the current victory was only temporary. But her role was now over, although her father and Aragorn had asked her to make a record of events.

Meanwhile, her youngest brother, Amrothos, sauntered in her direction and sat down beside her.

"You were very quiet, yesterday," she said.

"What was there to tell? All the attention went to the great heroine from Dol Amroth," he said.

"I'm not asking for attention," she said. "Nor was it my decision to stay behind. You know as well as I do that defending Dol Amroth was a task assigned to me ... as punishment."

Amrothos shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you have done your task well. Hooray for Lady Lothiriel." His voice dripped with sarcasm.

"What's your problem?" she said frowning.

"My problem is," he hissed at her, "that while you are being hailed as a true heroine, there are thousands of soldiers who are at least as brave, but there is no singing about their exploits."

"As I said," she said disconcertedly, "it is not my wish to be treated as a hero."

“Still, I would be careful,” he said. “Not all the men here are from Gondor; many are from Rohan. To them you are not a hero, but a woman, fit only to serve them ... or please them, if you understand what I mean.”

Despite the fire, Lothiriel was suddenly petrified with cold. “I never believe father would have called me here if he had known it would not be safe,” she said.

“He wouldn't have done that,” sounded an angry voice behind them. “I have learned my lesson.” Prince Imrahil stood in the opening of the tent. With eyes narrowed to slits, he looked at his youngest son. “Where do you get the nerve to threaten your sister like that,” he said. “You, who of all my children have shown the least courage.” He shook his head. “Aragorn showed himself a mild leader when he sent you as the captain to Cair Andros. If it had been up to me, I would have dragged you by your hair to the gates of Mordor. I heard already of your treachery, of how you set your friends against your own sister.”

Lothiriel looked at her brother with wide eyes. Amrothos avoided her gaze. She jumped up and ran away.

And while Prince Imrahil banished his youngest son to Minas Tirith with the next supply ship, Lothiriel slalomed upset among the trees and patches of fog to the riverbank. Despite the harsh words he often spoke, she could not believe Amrothos would ever harm her. She hesitated only a moment before throwing herself into the water. The chill hit her like a sledgehammer blow and she gasped in surprise.

“Come out Lothiriel! The river is too wild and cold,” Mirna called from the bank.

Determined, Lothiriel lowered herself completely underwater. She swam to the deep and fast-flowing part of the river. “She's barely cold enough to organize my thoughts,” she cried as she resurfaced.

“Lothiriel, town guard of Dol Amroth, even Prince Imrahil's daughter does not have eternal life. Come out of the river before you drown.” Mirna's voice sounded desperate.

“I would rather drown than put myself at my brother's mercy,” Lothiriel said stubbornly. But the cold made her turn around and she swam slowly against the current to the shore.

“Your lips are already turning blue,” Mirna said. She held up a towel.

Lothiriel looked at the wrinkles on her young friend's forehead and thought of Tihomir in the infirmary. She looked for footing on the smooth, algae-covered river stones.

“Come here, crazy human. Take off your wet sleeping shirt before you get sick,” Mirna said and held out the towel to Lothiriel.

Lothiriel plucked at the shirt that had clung to her skin. The cold bit into her calves and despite her short swim, she trembled all over her body. She laughed clatteringly as she painstakingly pulled her shirt over her head and handed it to Mirna. “And now let's hope the soldiers don't want to take a bath this early in the morning either,” she said. At that moment a few meters away a branch creaked and she saw someone disappear among the trees. Startled, she thought of Amrothos' words. She snatched the towel from Mirna's hands and covered her body.

With the defense plan under her arm, Lothiriel walked to the infirmary. Once inside, she realized it was a measure of nothing. In the semi-darkness of the tent, you couldn't read a plan. But there was plenty to tell without a plan, she thought, as she looked forward to sharing her news about Thorongil. She walked over to Tihomir's bed and saw that he was still asleep. She touched the sea opal hanging around his neck. "You should have kept your lucky chain," she said. "You needed it more than I did."

Damirah joined her. "He hasn't been awake since yesterday," she said. "I washed him and changed his bandages this morning with the healer, but he barely responded." As she spoke, her eyes almost dropped.

"You look tired," Lothiriel said. "Go and rest. I'll stay here until Mirna relieves me." Damirah disappeared and Lothiriel sat down on the edge of the bed. She stroked Tihomir's hair out of his face, but he seemed unaware of her presence. She took his hand and began to tell. About the attack on the city, about how hard it had been to find her courage and how thoughts of him had helped her do so. She told about the old water reservoir, about uncle Gojko and Branimir and the captains, about grandma Rhoswen and Azra's archers ... how brave they had all been and how they had kicked the pirates' asses. All the while, Tihomir's face remained impassive. She moistened his lips with the water from the jug beside his bed, caressed his feet, kissed his face, but he made no response. "What is the matter with you," she moaned. "What keeps you so deeply asleep?"

She called in the healer. "For answers you must be with King Elessar," he said. "He has taken care of him so far. He has been able to cure many sick people."

She hoped Mirna would relieve her soon so she could visit Aragorn. Meanwhile, she felt restless, useless. Finally she took Tihomir's hand and began to sing softly, until her voice broke and tears rolled down her cheeks. "I wish you had stayed with me," she said. "I would have saved you. Whatever sword had hit you, I would have taken the blow for you."

"It wasn't a sword that hit him," a voice said. She looked back. Aragorn was standing behind her. "He was attacked by Nazgûl" he said, "one of Sauron's most powerful servants. Anyone struck by them will eventually lapse into a deadly darkness. Unless we can intervene quickly." Lothiriel closed her eyes. "Why ...," she said. "How ... Will he get any better?"

The future king gently touched her arm and shook his head. "I'm afraid not," he said. "They searched a long time before they found him."

Full of horror, Lothiriel looked at him. Tihomir had not been able to call for help. With a sob, she buried her face in her hands.

After a while, Erchirion joined her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I promised you to watch over him." Lothiriel shook her head. "It's not your fault," she said. "He wanted to go on an adventure so badly. He wanted to show father how brave he was, hoping he would then agree ..." Tears were already streaming down her cheeks again, snot dripping from her nose, and her big brother pulled her into his arms. Gently, this time.

It was also Erchirion who took her away from her friend's deathbed hours later. "Come with me," he said. "Father handed out the supplies from Dol Amroth and we will drink and eat tonight to a safe homecoming in a safe city."

Stunned by her grief, Lothiriel allowed herself to be carried to the tent where her mother washed her face and braided her hair. She followed her family members to a clearing in the

camp where the men of Dol Amroth had gathered around lavish tables. Her father gave a speech she didn't hear a word of. She looked blank as the people around her raised their cups and toasted. Then she was grabbed and suddenly found herself on top of the table. She woke up from her stupor and looked questioningly at her father. From his compelling look, she deduced that she needed to say something. Beggingly, she looked at Erchirion, but he only nodded at her encouragingly.

What did she have to say, she thought, now that all sensible thoughts had been washed away by her tears. She looked at the rows of men in front of her. Some wounded, others stricken with grief over their fallen comrades. Brave men who had come face to face with a horrific enemy and who now looked at her silently and expectantly. "I stand here before you on this field of victory," she said at last. "Yet I do not see the men who left our city a few weeks ago. For every war means loss, even for the victors. Many of you lost limbs, brothers, friends ... Some lost their courage, while others found it. Because strangely enough, war also brings good things. It brings new friends, connection, and above all, peace. It makes us thankful for all that is good in this world. It makes us thankful that soon we will be able to return home, to a city where life is good among good people. It is not only those who stayed behind who secured Dol Amroth. You secured our city by destroying the enemy once and for all. And no matter how great or small your deeds were, no matter what you found or lost, I am proud to stand here before you. I love you." And at these last words she automatically clapped her fist on her chest twice, a gesture copied by all present.

"It must be really good living in Dol Amroth, if the women there speak such beautiful words," Éomer said to Aragorn.

Aragorn grinned. "You mean 'when such beautiful women speak such beautiful words,'" he said.

The two future kings shared a table that, like the soldiers', was stocked with delicacies from Dol Amroth. Éomer tasted of an unfamiliar fruit and tried to decide whether he liked it or not. "She is undoubtedly beautiful, Imrahil's daughter," he said, nodding his head in her direction. "And eloquent ... What fruit is this?"

"That's a fig," Aragorn said as he took a handful of nuts himself.

"Sweet. Spicy, but tasty," Éomer said.

"She is much more than that," Aragorn said in thought. "Imrahil put her in charge of Dol Amroth. She is the one who defended the city against the pirates."

Éomer looked at his friend with wide eyes. "Really?" He took another fig. "Impressive."

"And what is even more impressive," said Aragorn. "Is that she is making a fine speech now, when only an hour ago she was sitting at her friend's deathbed." He looked at the rows and rows of men holding their fists to their chests in unison and nodded appreciatively. "She is very popular with the men and Imrahil knows how to play that trump card well. She certainly wouldn't be out of place in the great hall of a king." He threw a few notes into his mouth.

Éomer looked from Aragorn to Imrahil's daughter in surprise. "Do you mean ...?"

"That she would make a perfect queen," Aragorn said.

As soon as she could, Lothiriel snuck back to the infirmary. There she found Mirna and Damirah who were in no more celebratory mood than she was. Mother and daughter were each sitting on one side of Tihomir's bed. Tihomir himself lay the same as before; still, pale, his breathing barely visible. Lothiriel pushed a chair closer and Damirah took her hands. "You have always been good to him," she said. "He has loved you very much."

Lothiriel noticed that she spoke as if he had already died. "I love him, too," she said.

Tihomir's friends came over and the three women made room to give them a moment's farewell. Before he left, Dragomir wrapped his arm around Lothiriel's shoulder. "Dol Amroth will never be the same without him," he said. With a throat tight with grief, Lothiriel gestured that she would miss him. Dragomir copied the gesture. For a while they stood side by side watching their dying friend. Until Prince Imrahil and Biljana also offered a final greeting, along with Erchirion and Captain Goran of the city guard. The more people passed by, the more Lothiriel realized that Tihomir's life was really coming to an end. She felt increasingly miserable.

The moon was already descending when Tihomir breathed his last. To Lothiriel, it seemed that with that last breath, all joy vanished. She had secured Dol Amroth for her fellow townspeople, but her own safe haven was gone forever.

The infirmary had been deserted for some time when Erchirion found her at Tihomir's side, caressing his hand. "It's not right," she said. "It's not right that good men die. What is a victory worth when the price is so high?" And how naive they had been, she thought, to think that only fame could be found on the battlefield. Reluctantly she allowed herself to be led away by her brother after which her mother obliged her to rest. In the solitude of her tent, she gave herself completely to her tears and finally fell exhausted into a restless sleep.

The little boat bobbed empty on the waves. Lothiriel swam under it, following Tihomir. They had rowed further than was actually allowed, and the sea here was already deep and dark. While Lothiriel enjoyed the silence, Tihomir swam deeper and deeper, deeper than Lothiriel could and dared. A little longer and she had to return to the surface. She saw something glistening at the bottom of the sea and it was tempting to swim on, but she knew she desperately needed air. She gestured to Tihomir that she was going back. He nodded and dove deeper. Gasping for breath, she surfaced. The air was threatening and the waves had increased. With great difficulty she hoisted herself into the empty sloop. A moment later, Tihomir also surfaced. She rowed toward him, but the waves kept knocking her backward. Frantically he tried to keep his head above water. Finally she managed to reach him and she grabbed his arm to pull him out of the water. A large wave engulfed the boat and suddenly Lothiriel was holding only one arm. Desperately, she grabbed underwater to save the rest of Tihomir as well. But no matter how she searched, she did not find him. When the sea finally calmed down again, she saw that Tihomir's hand was holding something. She opened the hand and found a sea opal. Although it was not that big, it had a beautiful shine. She begged the sea to return Tihomir and threw the shell into the water. But the sea remained silent. Tihomir was gone forever.

Lothiriel woke up when it was already dusk outside. Her pillow was wet with tears and her head was dull from crying. Bedazzled, she lay for a while listening to the sounds of the camp.

In the distance, she heard chanting. When she finally poked her head through the opening of the tent, she noticed that it was coming from a company sitting around a campfire some distance away. "Who is sitting there singing like that?" she asked her mother who was sitting in front of her tent.

"They are Tihomir's friends. They are holding a vigil. We are invited too, but I am waiting for you. The rest of the family is already there," Biljana said. "How are you, by the way?"

Lothiriël shrugged and dropped into the chair next to her mother. "I could ask you that, too," she said. "You lost your mother and your brother."

Biljana took Lothiriël's hand. "I still have your father. He keeps me upright when I falter. And I have my children." She put her arm around Lothiriël's shoulder and pulled her against her. "You are dearer to me than anyone else." She kissed her daughter on her forehead. "Come, we are going to say goodbye," she said and pulled her daughter out of the chair. "Bring a blanket, because it's already getting chilly."

Together they walked to the fire where about twenty people were gathered around it. In the dusk, she recognized her cousin Dragomir, Erchirion and her father. Captain Goran was also among them, with Damirah, Mirna and Azra beside him. They sat close together on logs. The two women found a place between Prince Imrahil and his son. "Ah, you are so clever to bring blankets," Erchirion said. He pulled his sister against him and Lothiriël arranged the blanket so that he could get under it. "Unfortunately the food is already finished," he said. "But there is still plenty of wine." A moment later, a cup came in her direction.

"Now that everyone is here, I would like to propose a toast," her father said. He stood up. "Tonight I drink to Tihomir," he said. "He was Damirah's son, Mirna's brother, and if my daughter had had her way he would have become my son-in-law as well." Lothiriël looked at her father in surprise. Imrahil smiled indulgently. "A wish I probably would have granted sooner or later." Lothiriël already felt tears stinging again. "Tihomir was a good man. He had a big heart and infinite patience, especially with my daughter. A quality not given to me." Erchirion laughed inwardly. Lothiriël gently poked him with her elbow. "In recent weeks he also showed courage," Imrahil said, "much more than I expected of him. Chances are that my son," he looked at Erchirion for a moment, "or I would not have been standing here if not for Tihomir. He covered our backs with a devotion I rarely saw. I am extremely grateful to him and will think of him often." He raised his cup and everyone drank with him.

After Imrahil, it was Dragomir's turn to toast. "Tihomir was a loyal friend," he said, "the best I could wish for. He was a faster rider and a better swimmer than I will ever be. He was resourceful and fond of stories and adventures. I am glad he still got to see the white city," Dragomir's voice broke, "but I will miss him greatly." He looked at Lothiriël who was nodding with tears in her eyes. Then he too raised his cup and another drink was taken.

Captain Goran now stood straight. "I am drinking to Tihomir tonight," he said, "Together with Lady Lothiriël, he devised the plan that led to the salvation of our city." As a city guard, he was respectful, tolerant and loved. His death is a great loss."

There were others who spoke, and from her cocoon under the blanket, Lothiriël listened to the beautiful words spoken by those present. And although she herself was barely able to speak and was in tears most of the evening, the loving words of all these people filled her heart.

Even the next day, during the cremation and scattering, Lothiriel still felt carried and comforted by the love she had witnessed the night before. She herself had no words of farewell, it was still too early for that.

"I wish we could scatter him in the sea," Mirna said. "That's closer to home."

"The Anduin flows to the sea," said Lothiriel. "It will take its ashes with it. But if you want, we can fill a casket that you can scatter later in the bay in front of the city." She removed her simple jewelry from their leather-covered casket and handed it to Mirna. Holding the sea opal, she looked at Tihomir's sister. "I think he would want you to have his lucky necklace," she said. It felt wrong to keep it. It felt wrong that she had had it with her all along, when he could have used the luck more. Mirna weighed the shell in her hand, looked at it for a while and slipped the necklace around her neck.

In the days that followed, Lothiriel experienced an emptiness and silence like never before. While her body rose, bathed and ate, her mind remained shrouded in fog. Her head felt heavy with tears. Despite the spring sun, she sometimes retreated for hours to the quiet of her tent where she endured only the presence of Mirna and her mother. When she finally allowed herself to be persuaded by her mother to leave her tent, she wandered aimlessly through the camp and discovered the horse pasture where she found Lysippe.

Her horse, which had been brought to Gondor by Amrothos, was skittish and poorly cared for. Lothiriel took the time to brush her and together with the farrier she trimmed her hooves after which the mare received new horseshoes. Then she regularly took her for a walk in and around the camp. As before, she poured out her heart and found in her four-legged friend an attentive listener. She had lost Tihomir forever, but Lysippe she had found again.

Éomer sat with Aragorn in front of his tent and watched Imrahil and his daughter walk together along the river. He continued to marvel at the seemingly natural grace of Imrahil and his family. Despite her grief, Lothiriel was still one of the most beautiful women Éomer had ever seen. He understood very well that Aragorn saw in her his dream queen. Father and daughter said goodbye, and as Imrahil walked in their direction, Lothiriel walked on. Éomer suspected she was on her way to the pasture where she seemed to find solace in tending the horses in recent days. He sighed. There was nothing more grievous than a sad, beautiful woman, he thought.

"I heard the boy died," Aragorn said when Imrahil had sufficiently approached them.

Prince Imrahil nodded and seated himself next to Aragorn.

"He has lasted a long time," Aragorn said. "As long as Frodo and much longer than the others who have been dealt with by Nazgûl."

"He waited for her," Imrahil said. He rubbed his face with his hands, and Éomer saw that there was a haze of fatigue over it. "I will never forgive myself for taking them apart."

Aragorn and Éomer looked at him questioningly. "I saw how their friendship changed and thought Tihomir could not make her happy because of his disability," Imrahil said. "Against Biljana's wishes, I tried to match her with other men. Men who were more interesting to me, men who could be allies in this horrible war." He sighed. "Apparently my people skills failed

me in this matter. For not only had I been grossly mistaken about the character of Duinhir's son, but also about Tihomir's qualities. Despite his young age, he turned out to be a strong, brave man ... And his greatest handicap was me." He looked at both his friends. "If you already find it difficult to run a country, wait a while longer before having children. Raising them is a real challenge."

IV. New friends

Lothiriel had seen them several times now, whether in the company of Aragorn or Gandalf or not, but she had never spoken to them.

"You mean the hobbits," her father said when she tried to describe them one evening, over supper. "Little men with big feet?" Lothiriel nodded. "They are small in stature, but big in deeds," her father said. "Two of those hobbits destroyed Sauron's ring in Mount Doom, breaking his power. The third is city guard of Gondor and the fourth is a knight of Rohan."

"Where did they come from?" she asked.

"From a region in the North," Imrahil said. "Aragorn brought them with him. They are both brave and cheerful."

"If you want, I'll introduce you to them tomorrow," said Erchirion who had been following the conversation. "It's time you made new friends." Lothiriel stuck her tongue out at him. The only friend she wished she had was Tihomir. And he was no longer there.

But her curiosity won over her stubbornness, and the next day she had her brother introduce her to them.

The hobbits were indeed cheerful and as curious as herself. They told her about their land, the Shire, where they appeared to live in comfortable dens. And like many residents of Dol Amroth, they were related to each other to a greater or lesser degree. One of them, Pippin, was delighted when he discovered that she was a town guard like him and was eager to see her uniform. She took him and his friend Merry to her tent to display it. Mirna looked surprised when Lothiriel came in with them and she too was introduced to them.

They spent the rainy day mostly in the luxury of Lothiriel's tent, where they told each other stories, sang songs together and, at Pippin's insistence, played a card game. Before they parted, Merry, himself a knight of Rohan, invited them to spend the evening around a campfire with the Rohirrim.

"Do you mean the horse people?" asked Lothiriel.

Merry looked at her displeased. "Horse people?" he said. "They breed horses, but they are more than a horse people. They are noble, brave men. They are in no way inferior to the men of Gondor."

Lothiriel remembered what Amrothos had said about the men of Rohan. "I'm afraid I must check with my father first," she said, and that was no lie. Shortly after Tihomir's death, her father had asked her to exercise caution in her dealings with soldiers. He had also forbidden

her from bathing or swimming in the river anymore. The men had been away from home for a long time, he had said, and after the horror of war, some needed but little encouragement to get overheated. Lothiriel had immediately understood what he meant. Although she never passed up an opportunity to swim, she had since settled for the bath tub Azra had brought from Dol Amroth.

"I promise to ask father," she told Merry.

"What to ask father," asked Erchirion who had just entered the tent.

"Whether I can accompany Pippin and Merry to the Rohirrim campfire tonight," Lothiriel said.

"I can't imagine him objecting to that," Erchirion said. "Éomer, their king, is a good friend. Both of father and myself."

He was right. When the matter was discussed at supper, Imrahil did not object. "You should go," he said. "It will take your mind off things."

"But the Rohirrim are so ... big and strong and surly," Lothiriel said. She looked at her father frowning.

He understood her hint. "Pippin and Merry will take good care of you," he said. "And maybe Erchirion can keep an eye on you, too."

Her brother nodded. "I'm coming, too," he said. "Though it might be a little later."

Cheerful voices and a dry sky lured the hobbits and Lothiriel to the fire around which about thirty men had gathered on logs. All were blond or reddish, most had beards and, judging by their appearance, filled their days with outdoor physical labor. Merry found an empty spot, just wide enough for the three of them. "Master Meriadoc, we always like to see you come, but today even more than usual because you bring some very fine company," one of the men said. Merry beamed and Lothiriel blushed. She was very conscious of being the only woman in this strange company. Cups of beer were pushed into their hands, and after making a toasting gesture, she took a big sip. It tasted bitter, but not bad, and with all eyes on her she took a second and a third sip. Merry and Pippin laughed and put on a song. As the sun sank and the beer flowed, the men sang along more and more enthusiastically. Some of the songs were sung in a foreign language. The language of the horse people, Lothiriel suspected. She didn't notice that it was getting chilly until Erchirion snuggled close to her.

"So, do you still find them surly, the Rohirrim?" he asked.

Lothiriel smiled. "No, tonight they are merry and loud." She snuggled into her brother's armpit, suppressing her sadness and enjoying the merriment around the fire.

With the coming of the moon, came the stories. Stories of battles and unexpected encounters. Big stories, but also small and very personal ones. They were told with many pauses and in soft voices because the losses were many and there was still much sadness in their hearts. Merry also sounded melancholy when he told of the loss of King Théoden and his own brave deeds. By now the company had grown further and Lothiriel tried to distinguish the men, but it was too dark and through the flickering fire she could only see fragments of faces. The beer and the warmth of the fire softened her, and supported by her brother's firm shoulder, she let her thoughts drift. This war was made up of so many separate pieces, she thought, that it

was hard to fit them together into one. The day she buried the victims of the attack on her city, endless more fell on the fields of Pelennor. And while they were already clearing rubble in Dol Amroth, the bravest soldiers marched with Aragorn to Morannon. Tihomir had been one of them. She was startled out of her musings by sudden laughter.

"... and she got as wild as a mûmakil," one man said. "She screamed that she didn't want to be left behind."

"Your wife was always wild," another man caught up with him as he threw a large block of wood on the fire. The fire flared up and the men laughed.

"You should have tamed her from the beginning," the man on the other side of Erchirion said laughingly. "Your horse listens better than your wife."

With a jolt, Lothiriel straightened up. She could not believe what she had just heard. Had Amrothos been right after all? Staring at the flames, she weighed her words. "You must be truly devoted horse people," she finally said, "that you have as much regard for your horses as for your wives." Erchirion put a hand on her arm warningly. Some of the men laughed nervously.

"We, horse masters of Rohan, have indeed great respect for our horses as well as for our women," replied the man who had spoken last. "Especially for brave women such as yourself, Lady Lothiriel."

Lothiriel contained her indignation. Was this man trying to silence her with flattery? She ignored Erchirion's hand. "Remember then, brave gentlemen, that a woman, like a horse, can go wild with fear," she said. "I was that woman you laugh so thoughtlessly at. I was that woman who went wild with fear of losing the men she loved. And I was also the woman who feared that it would not be her husband who would break open the gate to her city, but that she would come face to face with the enemy. And that while her husband died honorably on the battlefield, she was doomed to be abused before her end in every imaginable way."

A silence fell. "I'm sorry we hurt you," the man finally said. "That was not our intention."

Lothiriel shook her head. "It was not me who hurt you, sir, but your own wife for it is the words of those we love that cut deepest. Imagine how it feels to walk in her shoes. If only for one day and only in your mind. You will find that you will be more inclined to praise her for her bravery than to laugh at her fears. You will also find that such respect is usually rewarded with the greatest affection and devotion."

Erchirion squeezed her arm. "Hush now," he whispered to her sternly. "You are in the company of a king."

"Then isn't it up to the king to intervene when his men laugh at their wives? They are his subjects too, aren't they?" she whispered back. Erchirion squeezed even harder.

"Lady Lothiriel," Merry whispered on her other side. "That was King Éomer."

Lothiriel looked at him in bewilderment. "No," she said quietly. Pityingly, the hobbit nodded that she did. She bit her lip and suddenly realized that the men around her were conspicuously silent. Only the crackling of the fire was still audible. Lothiriel watched as a few logs crackled apart and swallowed. Had she offended King Éomer with her last thoughtless words? With bated breath, she was looking for a way to apologize without losing face when the man next to Erchirion finally spoke again.

"Your words were sincere and not in vain, Lady Lothiriel," he said. "We will keep your counsel in mind when we return home."

Lothiriél closed her eyes and let her breath escape. "Thank you, sir," she said. But despite his diplomatic answer, she rightly felt reprimanded. "I think I'll just go to sleep," she whispered to Merry. And to her brother she said, "I'm sorry. I should have listened to you." She got up, wished everyone a good night's sleep and hurried to her tent.

Although she fell asleep quickly under the influence of the beer, she woke up early. It was still quiet in the camp and the sun was not yet up when she opened her eyes. Her first thought went to Tihomir. She wished she could see him, that she could feel his skin under her hand, but more so she wished he was giving her advice, for her second thought went to the words she had spoken so thoughtlessly yesterday. He would soothe her, she suspected. He would tell her that this King Éomer, who was full of brave tales but despised his own wife, would soon forget the incident. But Tihomir was not there, and she continued to ruminate on her words for quite some time. She wished she had kept her mouth shut, that this whole war was just a terrible dream and that she would wake up in her own bed. Then she would coax Tihomir into a riding competition, she thought before falling back asleep.

Several hours later, she sat at the breakfast table with her parents who inquired curiously about her encounter with the Rohirrim. She recounted their songs and stories and felt obliged to confess her own altercation with their king as well. "Although I was annoyed by his condescending remark about women, it was not my intention to reprimand him in front of his men," she said. "I didn't know he was there, much less that he could hear my remark." "I think you just heard some sniping from men among themselves," her father said. "I wouldn't be surprised if the man who laughed with his wife loved her and served her every need when he came home. But I understand that it hit you and you jumped into the breach for her." He stood up. "I suspect King Éomer worries about greater things than the words of a young woman with a feisty tongue. He never expected to become king, and the task that awaits him is immense. And I also realize now that you were never officially introduced to each other." Lothiriél shook her head. "Then we shall rectify that tonight by sharing a meal together. I suggest you invite him, then you can apologize all at once." "Father, I don't even know what he looks like," she said. Her father burst out laughing. "Big, broad and blond," he said. "And at this time of day he's either in his tent or with his horses."

On the way to King Éomer's tent, Lothiriél rehearsed her words. She would keep it short and sweet. And she already resolved to pay extra attention to her words that night. The royal pavilion was quickly found. It was larger than the other tents and decorated with colorful patterns of interwoven lines. The green flag with the white horse moved gently in its upright. "I bring the king a message from Prince Imrahil," she said to one of the guards. The guard disappeared through the flaps of the tent, and a moment later another man appeared. As her father had said, he was tall, broad and blond, though he was much younger than she had expected. He wore a simple linen shirt that, despite the beautiful embroidery on the collar, had seen its best days. His face was sullen. Indeed, he probably had bigger concerns than the

pithy words of a young woman. Lothiriel noticed that she was rubbing her hands nervously and lowered her arms. Short and sweet, she thought as she bowed. "I come on behalf of my father to invite you to have dinner with our family tonight so he can officially introduce us to each other," she rattled off. "And also I come to apologize for my careless words yesterday." King Éomer raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps we both chose our words carelessly yesterday," he said after a while. "I gladly accept the invitation, and I hope to hear tonight the story of Dol Amroth's victory."

"Then I hope you are not expecting a heroic story," she said. "Because my story is about doubt, fear and sorrow."

"That is always true when the story comes from the mouth of the hero himself. It is the others who make it a hero's story."

"Why do they want to make every victory a story of courage and sacrifice," she said defiantly, "There is nothing beautiful about murder, blood and destruction."

Again his eyebrow shot up. "Surely we must honor our heroes," he said. "And where else should our men find their courage but in the victories of their predecessors?"

Lothiriel gulped. She had never looked at it that way before. "Still, it seems fairer to let them know that courage is preceded by fear."

"It might be fairer," he said. "But certainly no wiser, unless you want to appear on the battlefield alone."

Although his face was still sullen, she saw the corners of his mouth curl and she wondered if he was secretly laughing at her. She left with a brief nod. So much for her short and sweet approach, she thought.

Lothiriel spent the rest of the day with Lysippe and Mirna. She taught Tihomir's sister how to ride a horse, which was getting better and better despite Lysippe's impatience. When they returned to her tent shortly before dinner, Biljana was waiting for them in party attire. "What kept you guys anyway," she said. "King Éomer is coming soon." She smelled Lothiriel's hair and pulled up her nose. "You smell like a horse."

"He's king of the horse people," Lothiriel said. "He can stand that." Nevertheless, she began to wash. Biljana insisted that Lothiriel put on her finest dress, while she wanted to save it for King Elessar's coronation. In the end, they made a compromise. Instead of her blue dress with silver thread, it became her red dress with black and gold embroidery. To please her mother, Lothiriel had her hair sprinkled with lavender water and braided with a red ribbon. It was clear to Lothiriel that she needed to make a good turn. The last time she had been officially introduced was weeks ago when Duinhir and his son visited Dol Amroth. She frowned. She had heard that both Derufin and his brother had died in battle. And although she had not been served by Derufin's buffoonery, she sympathized with his father. Suddenly a bell rang. "Is King Éomer actually married?" she asked.

Biljana looked at her in surprise. "I don't think so," she said.

"Is that why we're getting so dressed up for? Does father have another plan in his head?"

"I should hope not," Biljana said. "He has promised me that from now on he will leave choosing a husband entirely to you." She took her daughter by the arm. "Come," she said with a mischievous grin, "we have an appointment with a prince and a king."

Prince Imrahil had also made work of his appearance. "Azra took care of me," he said glowering when his wife complimented him. "A seaweed bath and a foot massage."

Imrahil was not the only one who was cared for, also Erchirion had considerably less facial hair than when Lothiriel arrived. He was the only one of her brothers who suffered from beard growth. He smiled at the sight of Lothiriel's dress as he wore a shirt of the same fabric. "Clearly, we get family discounts," he said.

Lothiriel felt that her relatives had put a lot of work into their appearance. She was almost relieved when their guest arrived and he too wore a dressy tunic instead of that morning's discard.

Notwithstanding that the meal had been prepared in a field kitchen, it had tasted good to them. Now the company sat satisfied with a glass of wine, nuts and a plate of dry fruits. At King Éomer's insistence, Lothiriel had given a brief account of the attack on her city. It had not become a story of doubt, fear and sorrow, but she had kept her own part to a minimum and had given extra emphasis to that of her captains and Gojko. She was relieved that now that the story had been told, she could leave the floor to the others.

"Such an urban war is of course completely different from a battle on open ground," Imrahil said. "It requires a very different strategy."

"Truth thirteen from Sunju," Erchirion said pedantically. "Adjust your strategy depending on your terrain."

"You barely have an overview of the battlefield," the prince said, oblivious to Erchirion's interruption. "Which, by the way, can also play to your advantage. Lothiriel was smart enough to have the archers walk across the rooftops so they could get from one place of the city to another unseen."

"And with that she revealed all her shortcuts," Erchirion said with a fat nod to his sister. "I am sure that from now on many couples in love will walk the rooftops." Lothiriel rolled her eyes, but nevertheless burst into laughter.

Éomer raised an eyebrow. "I don't quite understand," he said. "Walking across rooftops seems to me to be life-threatening."

"It is," Erchirion said. "But for love you'll do anything."

Under the table, Lothiriel kicked him. "And that comes from two men who fought mûmakils, orks and trolls," she said with a look full of disbelief. "The houses in Dol Amroth have mostly flat roofs," she said to Éomer who sat next to her. "And they are built up against each other. You walk as comfortably on the roofs as you do on the street. And where the row of houses stops, it's just a short hop to the other side."

Éomer looked at her wide-eyed. "Life threatening!" he said as he took a fig.

Lothiriel clucked her tongue in frustration. "It was important for the archers to move quickly and unseen," she said. "That way we could avoid many man-to-man fights."

"Truth fourteen of Sunju: harness the energy of your soldiers at the best ..." Erchirion stopped and looked fearfully at his mother. Biljana had stood up, grabbed a stick from the hive beside the fire and was now walking toward her son with the stick in her hand.

"I understand your enthusiasm, but try not to keep interrupting the others," she said as she handed him the stick. She sat back down. "It's a talking stick," she said apologetically to Éomer who looked at her with an equally apprehensive expression.

Erchirion looked mortified and put the stick in front of him on the table. "I can do without the stick," he said sulkily.

Lothiriel gave him an encouraging pat on the arm. "I believe in you, brother. You can do it!" she said as Éomer choked on his fig through laughter.

"What pleasantly surprises me," said Imrahil whose mind was still in Dol Amroth, "is that we apparently have talented female archers in our city. I am thinking of opening up the city guard to men and to women."

"What?" cried Erchirion. Then he looked at the stick and shut up.

Lothiriel was pleasantly surprised. "Finally a man of sense," she said.

Imrahil shrugged. "Apparently pirates have no problem with their wives fighting along. And so our men can get used to the idea of female opponents."

Lothiriel nodded enthusiastically. "I'm glad my brothers and my friends didn't hold back every time we fought, because the city guards I had to practice with invariably refused to throw their full force into the fray."

"I think my men would hold back, too," Éomer said. "No man gets it over his heart to fight with a woman." He sounded like it was a done deal.

Lothiriel looked at him exasperated. "Not even if she listens worse than his horse?" she said. Éomer raised his eyebrows. "The pirates didn't hold back," she said with much conviction. "They hacked at us as much," she pointed to her mother and herself, "as they did at the men." "Biljana?" said Prince Imrahil to his wife, "did you fight too? Why am I only hearing about this now?"

"Only at the end," Biljana said as she gently patted Imrahil's hand. "I didn't want to worry you, dear. But I couldn't stand by and watch my daughter and my mother being chopped up without doing anything myself. At such a moment, fear and courage are close together. I just had to help them." She looked at Éomer. "We met your sister in Minas Tirith. She also fought, didn't she?"

"Without my knowledge," Éomer said. His voice sounded disapproving. "I knew she greatly admired Aragorn and dreamed of following him into battle, but I strongly advised her against it. Besides, it was King Théoden's wish that she stay behind to defend Rohan. How could I know that her dream was stronger than her will to follow the king's wish, or her brother's advice?" He shook his head. "I have been trying to protect her all my life. That was also why I taught her swordsmanship. Fortunately, Aragorn managed to save her from death. Éowyn fought the king-wizard of Angmar. It almost got her killed. And miraculously, she even managed to destroy him along with Merry."

Lothiriel picked up a handful of nuts and pondered his words. She felt admiration for this woman and disdain for the man who tried to restrain her. "How much protection does someone so brave and strong-willed need?" she wondered inwardly. "She is undoubtedly the prize horse of his stable." She did not realize the others had heard her until she received a kick from Erchirion and an angry look from King Éomer.

"I am not protecting her because she is weak, but because she is important to me," Éomer said.

There was just enough desperation in his voice to make Lothiriel weigh his words against her own judgment. Her brothers also behaved protectively at times, she realized, and although she found it difficult to admit it, she often experienced it as an expression of love. On the other hand, protective love could also be stupefying, she thought as she swallowed the last nut. "When a horse languishes in your stable," she asked Éomer, "would you lock it up or set it free?"

"Release, of course," Éomer said irritably.

"The same goes for a woman," she said. "Sometimes it is even enough to leave the stable door ajar."

Éomer looked despondent. "My sister did not languish," he said.

Although it was never completely quiet in the tent camp, it was a quiet morning under a pale moon. Éomer walked the path along the river to the horse pasture. He thought of the evening he had spent with Imrahil's family. Of the beautiful, fiery Lothiriel and her judgmental words, but also of the teasing bickering between her and Erchirion, the caring of Biljana and the imperturbability with which the prince sailed between his family's calamities. Not for the first time, he wished his sister was with him. He had sent her an invitation, but she had not come to the camp.

He heard someone behind him and turned around. In the moonlight, he recognized Gandalf's white hair and waited for the wizard to catch up with him.

"How was dinner at Prince Imrahil's," Gandalf said after they had greeted each other.

"Cozy ... and maybe a little confusing, too," Éomer said as they walked on together. Gandalf looked at him curiously. "We were talking about women who participated in the war, including my sister," Éomer said. He rubbed his chin. "I've been thinking about your comment in the house of healing. About how she felt trapped and longed for glory and great deeds. I still blame myself for not noticing." He looked at the wizard in despair. "I manage to lead thousands of men, but understanding the motivations of even one woman is beyond me."

Gandalf smiled. "Don't blame yourself," he said. "Some women are harder to understand than a thousand men. And yet ... men and women are not so different. Sometimes it's enough to put yourself in their situation."

"That's what Lothiriel said," cried Éomer.

"So you have already consulted with Imrahil's daughter," Gandalf said, nodding approvingly. "Good! Then you have probably noticed that both women possess the same strength of mind. And although they both want to fulfill their lord's wishes, they are brave enough to follow their own dreams. I think it's best to follow Lothiriel's advice in this situation."

The two men walked on in silence. "Do you have any idea why Éowyn is not coming to camp?" said Éomer after a while.

Gandalf frowned. "I imagine that, given her unrequited feelings for Aragorn, his closeness is difficult for her. And she may find things in the city that distract her." They had come to the edge of the horse pasture by now. "Éowyn is a strong woman," Gandalf said. "She will overcome her grief. And as for all who survived this war, there will be a new path for her to follow."

The wizard continued on his way and Éomer watched him thoughtfully.

“You tackled King Éomer hard last night,” Biljana said to her daughter. She sat on a stool next to the bathtub with an embroidery, keeping her daughter company while bathing.

Lothiriel bit her lip. “I know and I’m sorry,” she said. “But he is so patronizing ... so sure of himself.” She fished the sponge from under her legs and began to rub herself clean. “He reminds me of cousin Boromir,” she said after a while. “He had something authoritarian about him, too.”

“King Éomer is more handsome than Boromir,” Biljana said. Lothiriel looked at her mother in surprise. “Isn’t that right,” her mother said.

Lothiriel laughed. “What does that have to do with it?” she said. “But yes, he is handsome.” She put the sponge away and tried to enjoy the warm water. “Tihomir was handsome too,” she said after a while. Tears pricked her eyes. “I miss him so much.”

Biljana looked at her fondly. “I am sorry for you,” she said, “and even worse for him, because his life was short. Too short.”

“Without him, I’m just a silly girl who wants to belong to the boys,” Lothiriel said. Her mother looked at her in surprise, but Lothiriel suddenly saw very clearly. “I have always been surrounded by boys,” she said. “And with Tihomir around, I felt like one of them, free to do whatever I wanted. But the truth is, I never was for I’m a girl.”

Biljana peered into the bathtub. “That’s pretty obvious,” she said with an expressionless face. “I’d even dare say you’re a woman by now.”

Lothiriel rolled her eyes. “Perhaps Tihomir was more woman than I was,” she said. “He was gentle, sweet and caring, while I,” she searched for words, “am mostly fierce and wild ... and mean to a king who is pedantic and authoritarian, but who, given the task that awaits him, perhaps deserves better.”

Biljana looked at her daughter thoughtfully. “That’s an important insight,” she said hesitantly. “And perhaps it contains a tinge of truth.”

With a frustrated groan, Lothiriel let herself slide all the way under the water. And although the effect of a bathtub did not compare to the well-being of the sea, the water still brought her peace.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Biljana said as she surfaced again. “It’s your fierceness that saved us from the pirates. And you are softer and more caring than you think yourself.” She put herself behind the tub and began washing Lothiriel’s hair. Lothiriel closed her eyes and tried to enjoy her mother’s hands. Slowly she felt herself relaxing. Her mother bent down and kissed her forehead. “I love you, whether you are wild or soft,” Biljana said quietly in her ear. Despite her smile, tears slipped from under Lothiriel’s eyelids.

Éomer walked to the river with his marshal Elfhelm. Elfhelm had returned from Rohan with his company the night before. He had reported at length this morning and now wished to bathe with his men. The borders of Rohan were safe by now, but Éomer was worried about the damage his people had suffered. In addition to all the human casualties, they had lost many horses, and entire villages had been destroyed or burned down. His people needed

homes, and food, 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 homes themselves. He heard whistling and was startled out of his thoughts. Elfhelm's men had gone into the river and were bobbing in the water. But something had caught their attention that made them suddenly act immature. Horrified, Éomer looked at the two slim figures who had unsuspectingly walked up the path beside the river and were now getting the full attention of his men. Lothiriel quickly recovered. She averted her gaze, took her friend by the hand and continued on her way seemingly undisturbed. She had fortunately not noticed that most Rhohirrim were naked, Éomer thought. And it was even more fortunate that she did not speak their language, because to Éomer's embarrassment, the men were not only whistling, but shouting dishonorable proposals at the two women. He made himself big. "Men of Rohan," he shouted in Rohanese, "behave yourselves, especially in the presence of these honorable women!" His voice thundered and his eyes glared. All but a few of the men fell silent. Almost as silent as Lothiriel and Mirna, who remained startled. "This is Lady Lothiriel and her friend," he said in the common tongue, "they come from Dol Amroth where they fought as hard against the enemy as you did." He spoke less loudly now, but with equal authority. "I expect you to treat them respectfully." A few soldiers apologized, but the majority quickly splashed around again. Éomer shook his head and turned to Lothiriel. "I'm sorry," he said. "These soldiers only returned yesterday from Rohan where they hunted orcs long after the last battle." As he spoke, he saw her young friend staring wide-eyed at the river. "I suspect you are on your way to the horse pasture?" Lothiriel nodded absently. Her eyes, too, were now on the river. Éomer groaned internally and took Lothiriel by the elbow. "Is it all right for me to accompany you? I happen to be going that way as well."

Lothiriel heard the desperation in King Éomer's voice and tried to hold back her laughter. She exchanged a telling look with Mirna. "It is kind that you stepped in for us," she said to Éomer as she willingly allowed herself to be led away by him. "But we could have made it on our own." She ignored his affable look. "And we are indeed on our way to the horse pasture." They walked under the trees, lost in thought. "Did my sister, when you met her, say why she does not wish to come to camp?" asked Éomer after a while. "No," she said. "Didn't she send a message explaining her reason?" Éomer shook his head. "Not in so many words." He frowned. "And you've probably already noticed that I have trouble putting myself in her situation." Lothiriel smiled, surprised by his honesty. "I'm afraid I can't help you," she said. "Are you worried that something is wrong?" Éomer hesitated. "Yes, actually," he finally said. "Since you can't talk to her right now, perhaps you should write her a letter," Lothiriel said. "I understand that more men from the camp do give mail along with the supply boat." Éomer looked at her as if she had smallpox. "A letter?" "You know," Lothiriel said, "to share your feelings and thoughts." She remained standing. "You find it difficult to empathize with a woman's world. For us, it is no easier. Nor do we understand any of your motivations." She looked at the frown on Éomer's forehead. "You will have to find another way to communicate with each other." "I don't need a letter to communicate," he said gruffly.

"All right," Lothiriel said. "I just wanted to help."

"I just wanted to help just now, too," Éomer said. "But apparently you don't need any help." Lothiriel looked at him in surprise. "You have no idea how difficult it is for a man to understand what goes on in a woman's mind," he said. His voice sounded frustrated. "Let alone to know when to protect her or not."

"A woman is not a treasure that needs to be protected," Lothiriel said more fiercely than she meant. "A woman has a soul, a will and dreams of her own," she continued more calmly. "You must give her air and ... and space to keep her alive. And to keep her love, you have to let her make her own choices," she said.

Éomer frowned. "But what if she makes a choice that could cost her her life?"

"That, King Éomer, is what a woman experiences, every time her father, brother, son or husband goes to war ... It's quite frightening, isn't it?"

"No," he said after a while. He shook his head. "What you ask is impossible. What kind of king would I be when I don't even know how to protect my own sister?"

Imaginatively, Lothiriel pulled out her hair. "So you are protecting her to prove you are a good king?"

"I'm protecting her because I love her."

Lothiriel breathed in and out deeply. "I'm trying to understand," she said. "But still there is something selfish in that love. It seems wiser to me to let those we love make their own decisions."

"Even if it ends up wrong?"

Lothiriel swallowed. "Even if it ends up wrong," she said.

He looked at her with a look full of disbelief. This man was impossible, Lothiriel thought. She pulled Mirna with her, leaving Éomer behind. "Have you ever seen such a stubborn, pedantic man before," she said stompingly. Only when she got to the horse pasture did she calm down again. Should she have stopped Tihomir, she wondered. Would he have been safer if he had stayed in Dol Amroth? Despairing, she shook her head. She looked at Mirna. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry for going off on such a rant. It's just ... That man is so ... different from your brother."

Shortly after noon it began to drizzle and Lothiriel and Mirna retreated to Lothiriel's tent where she finally began writing the account of the battle of Dol Amroth. While Lothiriel wrote, Mirna worked on her sketch of the hobbits. "I wonder if they have little horses too," she said, "and little pigs and chickens and stuff."

Lothiriel looked up. "You mean: everything we have, but in miniature." Mirna nodded. "Hm ... interesting question," Lothiriel murmured, but her thoughts were on that terrible night, weeks ago, when she feared her last hour had struck. She was just describing Azra's part in the battle when her father and Aragorn entered the tent.

"We would like to speak to you for a moment," her father said. He offered Aragorn a chair and sat down beside him. "The subject is rather sensitive," he said looking at Mirna.

Mirna took the hint; she gathered her things, bowed and left. Lothiriel still sat on her bed, surrounded by scrolls of parchment. She looked at the serious faces of Aragorn and her father and bit her lip.

"You know I'm thinking about allowing women into the city guard," her father said. Lothiriel nodded. "And you no doubt remember the reaction of Erchirion and Éomer when I suggested that idea." Again she nodded.

"Nevertheless, it seems necessary for us to proceed with the plan," said Aragorn. "The pirates may have suffered a heavy defeat, but sooner or later they will begin to skim our shores again in search of booty and slaves."

"Given the reaction of our men, it seems best to give the women separate training," her father said. He looked briefly in Aragorn's direction. "What we would like to suggest to you is that you train a female company." Lothiriel looked at both men with wide eyes.

"And once we have a women's company in Dol Amroth, I would ask you to teach other women how to defend themselves as well," Aragorn said. Lothiriel's mouth fell open.

"Of course," she said as soon as she recovered her speech. "Very much so." She turned to Aragorn. "I know the women in Dol Amroth will welcome the idea, but do you think there is interest among other women as well?"

"Sauron's forces have killed many civilians, both men and women. I think they see the point of it," he said.

The broad smile on Lothiriel's face betrayed her enthusiasm, and the men nodded in satisfaction. "That's settled then," said the prince. He stood up and solemnly shook his daughter's hand. "Welcome aboard, Captain Lothiriel. I will announce the news as soon as we return home, keep it to yourself for now."

It was only when the two men were back outside that the impact of their words dawned on Lothiriel. Laughing loudly, she jumped up, the inkwell toppled over and the scrolls of parchment slid off her bed. Her cries of joy were audible as far as a few tents away, where a young king looked up in surprise.

As was the custom by now, Lothiriel and Mirna walked to the horse pasture the next morning. Lothiriel still felt excited, and it took her effort to concentrate on Mirna's riding lesson. She felt relieved when Dragomir joined them and suggested he take over the lesson. Attempting to clear her mind, she took care of a mare who was limping. It was a quiet black horse with three white socks and a narrow blaze.

"Let me have a look," Lothiriel said to the mare as she stroked her blaze. She picked up the limping front leg. The hoof felt warm to the touch. She looked at the underside and saw that one of the hoof nails had been ripped through, leaving the horseshoe loose. But the real cause of the lameness, she suspected, was in the abscess that showed yellow at the level of the heel. She lowered the leg and took the mare to the farrier who removed the shoe. Back at the pasture, she secured the mare to a tree. With her back to the mare, she picked up the limping leg and fixed it between her knees. Concentrating, she cut away the horn around the abscess layer by layer. The mare remained calm, occasionally sniffing Lothiriel's neck, until she began cutting near the abscess, where it hurt. The horse began to shake her head violently.

"Slow down," she heard suddenly behind her. Lothiriel closed her eyes. Of all the men in the camp, she thought, she had to meet him again. She turned around.

"Need help?" said Éomer as he grabbed the mare's halter. Displeased, Lothiriel looked at him. He let go of the mare and raised his hands apologetically. "I forgot you don't need any help," he said. He made to walk away.

She bit her lip. "It would help if you held her for a while," she said finally.

Éomer's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Are you sure?" he said with a defiant look. Lothiriel nodded. He untied the horse from the tree and took her by the halter. The corners of his mouth curled. Lothiriel ignored it, turned around and carefully cut further.

"What are you actually doing?" he said.

"She's limping and I'm trying to open her abscess," she said.

He bent over her shoulder and looked at her work. "You've done this before." With a suppressed smile, Lothiriel studied the horse's sole.

"Maybe a little more down," he said. He loosened his grip, bent toward her and pointed with his finger. Lothiriel tried not to stare at the chest hairs that peaked between the laces of his shirt and cut away the piece of horn he was referring to, opening the abscess. Surprised by the sudden pain, the mare threw her head up, causing Éomer to fall against Lothiriel. A trickle of pus escaped from the abscess.

"I'm sorry," Éomer said as soon as he regained his balance.

Lothiriel looked back. "Do you have a good hold of her," she asked, raising an eyebrow. Éomer nodded. She pushed as much pus out of the abscess as she could and carefully lowered the leg. "Thank you for the help," she said as she took the halter from him.

Éomer watched as she led the mare away. "Where are you going?" he said.

"To the river," Lothiriel said. She turned around. "To rinse the wound."

The sun was already at its highest when Lothiriel brought the mare back to the pasture. There was no trace of Mirna and Dragomir and, lost in thought, she walked to her tent. Not long ago, Dragomir preferred the company of Tihomir and Lothiriel to that of Mirna. Lothiriel tried not to be jealous of their friendship, but she did feel lonely. Finally, she found them in front of her parents' tent, where they sat around the fire with Erchirion and Biljana. The smell of fresh soup met her and hungrily she joined them. "How did the riding lesson go," she asked.

"Good," Mirna said. "Dragomir would like to have a portrait of Tihomir. Could I borrow yours as an example?"

"Of course," Lothiriel said. "It's in my chest. But I would like to have it back afterwards." Mirna nodded.

"You're getting better and better at drawing portraits," Biljana told her. "Maybe I can persuade you to make one of us too?"

"We already have a portrait of our family," Erchirion said.

"Yes, one where I'm a six-year-old girl and you don't have a beard yet," Lothiriel said.

"Back then you were cute," Erchirion said.

"And you were still soft," Lothiriel said as she teasingly stroked her brother's jaw.

"I'm still soft," Erchirion grumbled. "Under my beard I'm all softness."

Lothiriel laughed. "That's true. You are the sweetest pirate in Middle-earth."

"I'm not a pirate any more than you are," he hummed. "It's not looks that count." Lothiriel gave him a kiss on the cheek, and Erchirion looked at her with a mixture of surprise and gratitude.

"That one still belongs to Grandma Rhoswen," she said. "She thought of you often during the attack." Lost in thought, she sipped her soup. "And you're right. The pirates who invaded Dol Amroth didn't have beautiful curls like you." She shook her head at the memory.

"And they were meaner than you," Mirna said. Erchirion thrust his chest forward and looked at her menacingly, making him look like a little boy trying to impress. The company burst into laughter.

"I think it's brave that you fought along," Dragomir said to Mirna. Lothiriel saw the admiration in his gaze and understood that there may have been another reason for his recent interest in Tihomir's sister.

Mirna suddenly seemed very shy. "Only at the end, together with mother, when the battle was already pretty much won."

"Is there another bowl of soup for a tired woman," asked Azra who was suddenly behind them.

"Of course," Biljana said as Lothiriel shifted.

"Do you have time to help me today?" asked Azra as she took her seat with her bowl of soup. Lothiriel nodded. "Good," Azra said. "I'll have four hobbits visiting this afternoon."

Azra's black curls shot in all directions. Drops of sweat slid down her temples and her dress was more wet than dry. Lothiriel looked at her own dress that looked just as wet and crumpled. In the bath tub next to the fire, Merry and Pippin smilingly decorated each other with strands of seaweed. Sam and Frodo, the two other hobbits, had already left the seaweed bath and lay wrapped in warm towels enjoying a foot massage. "Of the many wonders of Middle-earth, this is surely one of the most cozy," Merry said as he made a seaweed mustache. Lothiriel smiled. "I'm glad you're having a good time," she said. She massaged the bottom of Sam's big toe. The soles of the hobbits' feet were thick and her thumbs protested the hard work.

Sam moved his neck from side to side. "Strange," he said, "my neck pain seems to be disappearing. Do you perhaps also have a remedy for the pain in my knees?"

Again Lothiriel smiled. Sam had been reluctant at first while bathing, but with encouragement from his friends, he began to loosen up more and more. She moved her fingers to the tops of his feet where the skin was more hairy, but supple.

Sam sighed enjoyably. "This, Master Frodo, is a well-deserved reward after our long journey," he said. "Lady Lothiriel, you really are good with feet."

Frodo smiled. He, too, was enjoying himself under Azra's experienced hands. "I didn't even know you had pain in your knees," he said.

"I didn't mean to bother you, but all that climbing the past few months hasn't done my poor knees any good," Sam said.

"So Gimli got the same treatment this morning," Pippin said. "I would have liked to have seen that. I bet he didn't do that voluntarily, but that Aragorn had ordered him to."

"Anyway," Azra said, "he enjoyed it as much as you did." She looked at the two men in the tub and rolled her eyes. "Though he did leave the seaweed floating in the water." Lothiriel laughed. Pippin and Merry had managed to cover their entire heads with seaweed, making them look like cute little sea monsters.

The moon was full and the evening was gentle. Aragorn had just announced that his coronation would take place on the first of May and that the camp would be broken up in a few days. His announcement had created an atmosphere of joyful anticipation and all around the camp men were sitting together around fires. Éomer also sat with some friends in front of his tent. Although he did not yet have an official date for his own coronation, he shared in the joy. He had treated not only his men but also himself and his friends to beer.

"And his horse could really speak?" said Gimli, the dwarf, in disbelief.

"That's what the stories tell," Éomer said. With hefty gulps, he drained his cup. "I must honestly admit that until recently I too was suspicious of such stories. And then, in a matter of days, I met dwarves, elves, ents and hobbits. So, why shouldn't there be talking horses?"

Erchirion set his empty cup down beside him and raised an eyebrow. "Yes, why not," he said. "I had never seen an ork until a few weeks ago, except in the books of father's library."

"Does your father have a library?" said Éomer. "In Rohan, we have no written stories. Our stories are sung and passed on orally from generation to generation."

"And that's how you get talking horses," Erchirion said, rolling his eyes.

Éomer and Gimli laughed.

"Good evening," said Lothiriel who stood unexpectedly in front of them. Éomer looked up. She bowed. She was wearing the same red dress she had worn at supper a week earlier and, as then, he gave her face a fiery blush. She smiled and her eyes sparkled. Éomer swallowed.

"King Éomer, father wants to give you his last bottle of pergria," she said. She bent toward him causing him to smell the confusing mixture of horse and flower scent that always surrounded her. He took the bottle from her with his fingers resting on her hand just a little too long.

"Thank your father for me, please," he said. Lothiriel nodded. "Why don't you drink a cup with us?"

"Thank you for the invitation," she said. "But it seems better not to." She smiled at her brother and turned away. Éomer watched her desperately.

"Prince Imrahil has a beautiful daughter," Gimli said as he exchanged a meaningful look with Erchirion.

"You do talk about my little sister," Erchirion growled, looking at Éomer with growing suspicion.

"What?" said Éomer. He saw the telling look on their faces. "No," he said. "No, I have no plans with her ... Aragorn, on the other hand, doesn't waste any time," he nodded toward Aragorn who was just coming in their direction. "I think their marriage has already been arranged."

"What?" cried Erchirion. "Don't let it be true! That would mean she becomes my queen!"

"Who will become your queen?" asked Aragorn in amazement.

"My sister," Erchirion said. "Aragorn, please tell me you have no marriage plans with her."

Aragorn laughed. "I think you have already dipped solidly into the ale," he said. He sat down and was handed a cup himself. "I can reassure you. I have no marriage plans with her, although I do hope to get married in the near future." He took a few sips from his cup.

Éomer looked at his friend in surprise. "But you said she would make a perfect queen."

"I am not the only king in this company," Aragorn said. "You found her beautiful, eloquent," he took another sip of ale, "and impressive. You even said she was spicy, but delicious," he said, grinning.

And while Gimli prostrated with laughter, Erchirion covered his ears whimpering.

"I wasn't talking about her," Éomer said, "but about the ... " With a confused look he took a stick from the fire and handed it to Aragorn.

"What should I do with this?" asked Aragorn.

"It's a talking stick," Éomer said. "It means it's time to shut up."

"How did it go with the hobbits this afternoon," Biljana asked.

"It was fun," Lothiriel said. Now that she thought back, she laughed again.

"I thought the dwarf was already special, but Hobbits really are an entertaining people," Azra said. She, too, smiled.

Biljana looked at them curiously. "What should I imagine with that?" she asked.

"Four Erchirions, in hobbit format," Lothiriel said.

Biljana burst out laughing. "I would have liked to have seen that," she said. "Now I understand why you both have such a healthy blush."

They sat with the women around their own fire. From her place, Lothiriel watched the group of men gather around Éomer's fire. They were exuberant, noisy and roasting scraps of bread on sticks in the fire.

"I fear we are in for a restless night," Azra said, following Lothiriel's gaze.

"What did King Éomer say?" asked Biljana.

"That I had to thank father," Lothiriel said as she stroked her hand. She looked at Éomer's fire again and frowned. Unconsciously, her hand slid to where she had carried Tihomir's shell. But the sea opal was gone. She had given it to Mirna. "Where is father anyway," she asked.

"Going to do his rounds," Biljana said. "But he left us a leftover pergria."

"Ha!" said Azra as Damirah distributed the brandy among their cups. "I'd like a sip of that."

"To the coronation of King Elessar! May he reign long and in peace," Biljana said and they toasted. Lothiriel felt the warmth of the brandy slide down her throat. Meanwhile, at the campfire some distance away, a song was starting and Lothiriel looked up. Just in time to intercept Éomer's gaze. Quickly she lowered her eyes.

"Is everything okay?" her mother asked.

Lothiriel nodded. "I don't know why," she said, "but I feel restless. Like something big is about to happen."

"I should hope so," Biljana said. "We are guests of honor at the king's coronation. The first in several thousand years."

Lothiriel sat by the light of a candle bent over a piece of parchment and wrote a letter to Tihomir. Not that he would ever read it, she thought. Nor was it really a letter, more of an ode to the love she felt for him.

As Azra had predicted, it had already been a restless night. Lothiriel had been lying for a while listening to drunken ramblings that were sporadically interrupted by her father's snoring in the neighboring tent. Finally, she had decided to get up to write her letter.

She reread her text, nodded in satisfaction and wrote her name below it. She rolled up the parchment, tied her red hair ribbon around it and was just aiming the scroll into her chest when she heard a bang, followed by loud voices and swearing. The tent trembled. Probably someone had fallen over the wind ropes. Frowning, she opened the flap of her tent. In the light of the moon, she looked at the men sprawled on the ground. "Looking for worms to go fishing?" she said amused and puzzled at the same time.

At that moment, Azra's swearing sounded from behind the tent. "Quick!" said Erchirion as he scrabbled straight. He pushed the hobbits into the tent and pulled Éomer with him.

"What's happening?" said Lothiriel in surprise, but Erchirion gestured for her to be quiet and quickly blew out her candle. With bated breath, they heard Azra cursing and ranting as she raced past. "She is angry," Lothiriel said as soon as Azra was far enough away. In the darkness, she tried to distinguish the men. Erchirion stood beside her, Pippin and Merry sat on her trunk and Éomer on her bed.

"What language did she actually speak?" asked Éomer. His voice hit double.

"The language of Umbar," Lothiriel said.

Éomer giggled and dropped backwards. Surprised, Lothiriel looked in his direction. "What did you steal?" she asked.

"Nothing," the two hobbits said simultaneously.

"Who says we stole anything," Erchirion said.

"Azra."

"Do you understand the language of Umbar?" said Erchirion.

"A little," Lothiriel said. "She cried out that she was robbed and then she named some ... private parts of the male body." She blushed, but the men couldn't see that in the darkness anyway. Again Éomer giggled. "What about him," she asked.

"Pergria," Erchirion said.

"And pipeweed," Merry said, "but of a slightly more punishing variety than Longbottom leaf.

"What is Longbottom leaf?" she asked.

"Pipeweed from the Shire," Pippin said. "The best there is."

"You are fine friends," said Lothiriel. "First you pour him full of brandy, drug him and then you make him an accessory to theft. Tell me, what did you take from Azra."

"Just some Bhangga weed," Erchirion said. "In small quantities it is quite suitable as pipe weed."

Lothiriel clasped her hands in front of her face. "Erchirion," she groaned, "Éomer is the king of Rohan. You can't just involve him in ... "

At that moment, the subject of their discussion awoke from his malaise and began to sing loudly. As agreed, brother and sister jumped on the bed to silence him. The two of them lay on top of Éomer who nevertheless continued his song.

"Quiet," Erchirion whispered imperatively. Lothiriel heard someone walking past the tent and quickly put her hand over Éomer's mouth. Even in the dark she could see that he was looking at her with wide eyes. His mustache and beard stubble pricked her hand and she giggled. Then he kissed the palm of her hand. Startled, she pulled her hand away and slid off the bed.

"Maybe you should go," she said. "I think the kiss ... the coast is safe now."

V. Henneth Annûn

The men talked about the waterfall as if it were their beloved. Although she did not want to overhear their conversation, they stood nearby and seemed unaware of Lothiriel's presence. Itilien had several rivers whose course through the Shadow Mountains meant that they had great height differences, and therefore beautiful waterfalls. But the most beautiful was that of Henneth Annûn, a shelter hidden behind the veil of a high waterfall. It was not clear what attracted the soldiers the most, the beauty of the waterfall or the hiding place it hid. Lothiriel watched the water ripple around her bare feet. The mare she had with her this time was struggling with laminitis. At least, that was what the farrier suspected. One of her mother's horses had suffered from it years ago; they had cured it with cold-water baths and a modified diet. Meanwhile, they had been standing in the running water for some time and her feet were white with cold. As Lothiriel moved her toes up and down, the mare pressed her head against Lothiriel's armpit. She wrapped her arm around the dark brown head and rubbed the horse's nose with her other hand. "What do you think," she asked, "shall we get out?" She turned around. The men had disappeared, but in their place now stood King Éomer. Lothiriel looked at him in surprise.

"About last night ...," he said. From beneath his eyelids, he looked at her uncertainly. "I came to apologize to you, for my behavior."

"What behavior?" said Lothiriel as she tried to hide her smile.

"Hm ... I think yesterday I was, hm, drunk." He swallowed visibly. "Which, by the way, is not of my habit. But somehow I ended up in your tent with some others. My apologies for that."

"Just for that?" said Lothiriel. She raised her eyebrow.

Éomer looked at her with a mixture of surprise and fear. "What do you mean?"

"You lay in my bed and kissed my hand."

Éomer's eyes almost rolled out of their sockets. "No," he said recoiling. "I don't remember any of that."

"Just as well," Lothiriel said, and she carefully stepped out of the water. "I am willing to forget it too, provided you help me persuade Erchirion to accompany me to Henneth Annûn. Father never lets me go alone."

"Why not," Erchirion said when they met him a moment later at the edge of the horse pasture.

"Does he still fear an attack from the enemy?"

Lothiriel shook her head. "Rather an attack from within. He fears some men would assault me." She felt uncomfortable with this accusation, and this time she stared at the ground.

"I hate to admit it," Éomer said, "but like your father, I cannot vouch for the honorable intentions of all the men here." He looked at Lothiriel gravely. "We may have destroyed the greatest evil of Middle-earth, but I fear there is a seed of evil in every man. Your father is right. A war like this can bring out bad intentions in even the best person. And yet it is unthinkable that you should leave Itilien without having seen its most beautiful wonder. Perhaps the three of us could go?"

Erchirion nodded. "We'll go tomorrow. I'll arrange it with father," he said.

In the end, it was not a group of three, but a company of fourteen that braved the fog early the next morning. When Erchirion presented his plan at supper, their father decided that not only Lothiriel, but all five women from Dol Amroth should witness the miracle of Henneth Annûn and that he too would accompany them. And as he gathered around a cozy fire after supper and informed his friends of his intention, some of them decided to join the group. As the company grew, so did the plans. Instead of a one-day excursion, it was decided that they would spend the night at the waterfall, and for the convenience of the ladies, a unit of soldiers was sent ahead with tents and other bringers of nightly comforts. The prince was very pleased with this arrangement. A trip like this would ease the grief over the loss of Tihomir, he thought. Éomer was less pleased. The initially intimate group of three had become an elated gang. Legolas, the elf from the Demsterwold, continued to ride stubbornly beside Lothiriel for most of the outward journey, engaging her in conversation about his people. It frustrated Éomer that she hung on his every word. And since the steep path was barely wide enough for two riders side by side, there was nothing for Éomer to do but stay in the rear of the company with Erchirion. When Erchirion, after a short break, maneuvered his horse next to his mother, Éomer decided to take care of Mirna. Although he had given her a tame mare, the horse reacted skittishly under Mirna's poor horsemanship. He continued to ride beside her until she got the horse under control.

They heard the waterfall before they saw it. With every step they took, the sound of steadily falling water raised their expectations, and they were not disappointed. Henneth Annûn, the secret hideout of Faramir's warriors, lay hidden behind the largest of an entire collection of waterfalls. It fell with much thumping along the flanks of a high slope into a lower lake. From there, the water flowed along a series of smaller waterfalls into a second lake surrounded by dense vegetation of trees and shrubs. Except at the southern edge where the second lake was bordered with a small beach strewn with river stones. Behind the beach was a narrow grassy field on which a dozen small tents had been erected in a semicircle. In the center of the semicircle was a fire. The whole place looked very sweet. Dragomir was waiting for them along with several other city guards, and soon the whole party was sitting down to a picnic. They had spent most of their trek riding in the shade of trees, and the warmth of the sun penetrating through the canopy in this clearing warmed their chilled bones. After the meal, the company decided to split up. Some of them wanted to continue down the trail to the big waterfall, while the women decided to take a walk near the tent camp. Erchirion had promised Sam some time ago to teach him how to swim. They stayed in the camp together with King Éomer and Merry.

Guided by Azra, the women explored the western edge of the lake up to the smaller waterfalls. Along the way, they picked spring flowers and herbs. Lothiriel tried to take her eyes off the water that looked fresh and inviting. "How did the horseback riding go?" she said to Mirna after a while. "I should have helped you earlier. I neglected you and I'm sorry," Lothiriel said. Mirna shrugged her shoulders. "King Éomer helped me," she said. "He was very kind."

Meanwhile, excited shouts sounded from the direction of the camp, and Lothiriel suspected that her brother had begun his swimming lesson. Longingly, she watched the small waterfalls. The force with which the water fell into the lake created vapor that reflected the sunlight in as many as a thousand colors. She imagined what it would feel like to stand under it.

"Don't think about it," warned her mother who followed her gaze. "You're in the company of men. It's not appropriate to go swimming."

"The men are on the other side of the lake. They would hardly notice," Lothiriel said.

"You made your father a promise, I wouldn't want you to break it," Biljana said.

"Then what good is this outing?" asked Lothiriel and she sighed. "Maybe just my feet?" she asked in a sweet voice.

Biljana looked at her daughter and gave in. "Just your feet," she said. Moments later, Lothiriel was balancing on a large boulder as she let her feet disappear one by one into the hard jet of water.

On the other side of the lake, not far from the pebble beach, Erchirion stood up to his hips in the water. He supported Sam who was awkwardly making swimming motions while Merry and Éomer floated some distance out on the water. When Sam had gotten the hang of the moves and already dared to try a few strokes on his own, Erchirion swam toward Éomer and threw himself at his unsuspecting friend. Protesting, they both disappeared underwater, and when they resurfaced a moment later, laughing and mowing wildly around themselves, they caused so many waves that Merry lashed out. The women who had just come out of the forest were watching them amused. It was King Éomer who noticed them first. He stopped the mock fight and apologized, but Biljana assured him that his excuses were unnecessary and that the men should not care about the women. "Why don't you join us?" said Erchirion. "The water is delicious."

Lothiriel pulled her eyes away from Éomer's broad shoulders. She wondered if he swam naked like his men. "We're not allowed ... father ...," she began. She regrouped and looked at Sam. "How's your swimming lesson going?" she asked. "Let's see what you can do already." Sam swam a few strokes and then tried to stand. He panicked when he felt no ground under his feet and disappeared underwater. Lothiriel dove toward him. "It's all right, you're safe," she assured the hobbit as soon as she had him above water. She set Sam down in the shallows and pulled up her dress which, despite her good intentions, was wet down to her knees.

"You didn't do badly otherwise," said Merry joining them. "And you know what they say when you fall off your horse." Sam looked at him questioningly. "That you should crawl back on it as soon as possible," Merry said.

"And what does swimming have to do with horseback riding?" asked Sam.

"Maybe not so much, but Merry is right," Lothiriel said. "If you stop now, you'll never dare to try again." She saw the doubt in Sam's eyes and leaned toward him. "You've done braver things in the past," she said softly. "I'll stay right here, ready to get you out. Though I don't think it will be necessary."

Sam allowed himself to be persuaded and swam a short distance away from her, turned around and swam back again. Along with Merry, Lothiriel encouraged him, so she didn't notice Erchirion swimming underwater toward her. He grabbed her ankles and pulled her under.

Merry turned in surprise. "Death to the pirate," he shouted, and with Sam in his wake, he threw himself at Lothiriel's attacker.

Prince Imrahil who came riding down the path with the rest of the party sat watching it from his horse with his mouth open. While everyone watched with laughter as the two hobbits rescued the damsel from the pirate's clutches, Imrahil groaned with misery. "When will they finally start behaving decently?" he cried.

At that moment Erchirion threw Lothiriel over his shoulder, carried her out of the water and dropped her unceremoniously. "Father," he said with feigned pride, "I caught a big fish." Prince Imrahil hid his face in his hands.

Taking off the wet dress in a tent in which she could not stand up was more difficult than thought. With Mirna's help, Lothiriel was just trying to get rid of the wet garment when her mother stepped into the tent. "King Éomer has hit his foot on a stone," her mother said. "When you are ready, bring the bandage bag, and see if you can help him." Lothiriel looked at her surly face. Their father had just addressed his children sternly. And although he had absolved Lothiriel of blame, it was clear that she needed to behave in an exemplary manner for the rest of the outing.

Since they were not provided for wet clothing, her sleeping shirt was the only dry garment Lothiriel had at her disposal. To still make herself somewhat presentable, she wrapped her shawl around her shoulders, secured it with a gilded buckle and had Mirna braid her hair and decorate it with the freshly picked flowers.

Pippin had joined his two friends in the lake after the ride to the big waterfall, and Éomer sat at the water's edge watching the hobbits splashing around.

At least, that's what Lothiriel thought as she walked toward him. As she stood in front of him, she saw that, thankfully, he had put a shirt back on, but also that he was lost in thought and again had that typical frown on his forehead.

"Mother said you bumped your foot," she said. She pointed to the blood on his foot.

He looked up. "Never mind," he said. "It's not worth the trouble."

"King Éomer," she said as she looked at him pleadingly. "I literally stand before you in my shirt. My mother has instructed me to tend to your foot. Would you please do me the honor of accepting my help? Besides," she looked at the hobbits in the water, "according to Sam, I'm good with feet."

Éomer hesitated and finally held out his foot to her. She knelt down beside him and looked at the sole of his foot. The wound was long and frayed, but the water had already washed it clean. He was still bleeding only slightly. "You're right," she said. "There's nothing more to do but keep it clean. Is it all right if, to please my mother, I put a bandage around it?"

There was an amused look in his eyes. "You seem to have some making up to do with your mother," he said.

Lothiriel took the bandage from the bag. "With both my parents," she said. "And I can't blame them. They strike a crazy figure as parents of two mallards like Erchirion and myself."

"They love you," he said.

"And we love them," she said. "But we don't always show it correctly." She took the bandage and began wrapping it around his foot. "By the way, I want to thank you for helping Mirna this morning. I should have assessed her riding skills better and taken her under my wing."

He tried to pull his foot away. "It was no trouble," he said.

She gripped his foot more tightly, and again he tried to pull it away. Surprised, she looked at him. He had narrowed his eyes and clenched his hands into fists.

"You can't stand tickling," she said in surprise as she stroked the inside of his foot with her finger.

Éomer's eyes shot open and his gaze had something desperate about it. Then he began to laugh, jerkily, as if he didn't want to give in to it. Fascinated, Lothiriel looked at him, still stroking his foot. "Stop, please," he begged.

Suddenly realizing what she was doing, she let go of him. Hurriedly she gathered her things, stood up, changed her mind and sat back down. "Close your eyes," she said.

"What," he said. "Why?"

"I want to help you. Please trust me," she said. Éomer looked at her suspiciously, but closed his eyes nonetheless.

"Try to relax," she said when she saw his clenched fists. With her thumbs, she slowly massaged the central part of his foot sole. He started to laugh again, but Lothiriel did not let go of his foot. She pressed not too hard and not too soft, exactly as Azra had taught her years ago. Slowly Éomer's laughing stopped, then his hands relaxed, his breathing slowed, and finally the wrinkle on his forehead disappeared as well. Lothiriel looked at his relaxed, contented face and smiled. After a while, she stopped massaging and stood up.

"You have a beautiful smile, King Éomer," she said as soon as he opened his eyes.

With a grateful smile, he looked at her. "And you're really good with feet," he said. Lothiriel smiled and walked away.

Not long after, some of the men in the company decided to catch fish for dinner. Erchirion, whose patience for this was lacking, dug up crayfish while Gimli and Merry stoked up the fire. The others helped prepare a vegetable stew and bake flatbreads. Several large fish were already on dry land when, while washing the vegetables in the lake, Lothiriel nearly got tangled in a fishing line.

"Be careful not to hook my sister," Erchirion called out, laughing, to Éomer who quickly pulled in his line.

"You just be careful your sister doesn't mistake you for a pirate in the semi-darkness," Lothiriel said displeased. She rearranged her scarf for she was still wearing her shirt and felt naked among all these unknown men; unlike her brother who had been walking around in bare torso since their arrival.

"We have the same blood, sister. Whether you like it or not," he said. Lothiriel glared at him.

"What does a pirate actually look like?" asked Merry who had been following the conversation.

"Like Erchirion," Lothiriel said. "But with an even worse character."

Erchirion stuck out his tongue. "She's just jealous of my curls," he told the hobbit.

Biljana who had been following the bickering between her children looked at her husband. Prince Imrahil shrugged. "I think with your grandmother's glorious death, the time has come to share her story," he told his son.

"At last," cried Erchirion. "But I suggest that each one tells a piece. If only because, with my version of the story, I'll probably embarrass my father again." And with that, he suddenly had everyone's attention. So it was that, once they were all gathered around the fire, the story of the pirate prince and the rose was told.

"On the east coast of Belfalas Bay was the city of a king. A pirate king," Erchirion began the story. "Together with his men, he plundered the villages and towns around the bay. Anything of any value was taken to the castle in the center of his city. It was therefore equipped with numerous treasures and ...," he caught his father's warning look and searched for a moment for the right words, "a well-stocked women's quarters." Erchirion stopped narrating, took a stick from the pile beside the fire and handed it to Azra who was sitting a little way away.

She took the stick from him and continued his story. "Here lived the slave girls, captured during his raids and doomed to serve the king at his beck and call. These ladies, whether of their own will or not, provided him with a bountiful offspring." Azra sighed. "Daughters had little value to this king. Sons, on the other hand, were deployable armed forces. The best among them were rewarded with a ship of their own, and rivalry among them was therefore very strong." Azra stood up, walked right up to Prince Imrahil and handed him the stick.

The prince continued the story. "Further north in the bay, on a high cliff, lay Dol Amroth, a city which, since it had been founded by Numenoreans, had yet to lose anything of its original splendor. Its harbor held numerous fishing and trading ships, and its warehouses and cellars were filled with food and merchandise; a true treasure for many a pirate." Imrahil rolled his eyes. "Yet over the years the inhabitants had become arrogant and they thought themselves impregnable. For Dol Amroth was not only walled, she had well-trained city guards and a military fleet." He passed the stick to Dragomir.

"One man who did exercise caution was the young harbor master," Dragomir said. "He watched over the comings and goings of the merchants who came from far and wide to sell their wares. But the heroine of this story is Rose, his wife. She had given birth to a son a few months before and had recently been joined by a young maid." Dragomir walked over to Damirah, handed her the stick and sat down beside her.

"This maid was an orphan girl who to survive stole food from the warehouses," Damirah said. "Until the harbor master caught her and employed her out of pity." Damirah, who was clearly uncomfortable with the sudden interest, quickly passed the stick to Erchirion.

"In the pirate city meanwhile, one of the king's sons came to the years of maturity," he said. "He had grown into a handsome man with black, curly hair, a charming beard and deep brown eyes." Lothiriel coughed for a moment, which earned a gruff look from her brother. "Until then, he had filled his days with horseback riding along the beach and seducing the young maidens bestowed upon him by his father. But now he had planned to outdo his brothers with an extraordinary stunt. He commandeered a fishing boat, dressed himself and his friends as fishermen and set sail for Dol Amroth." Erchirion stood up, walked to Lothiriel and reached

out to hand her the stick, only to pull it back at the last moment. Lothiriel, mindful of this maneuver, pushed against his calf with her foot, causing Erchirion to lose his balance. As he scrabbled upright, she grabbed the stick and began to narrate.

“The pirates docked in the harbor and managed to penetrate the city's storage cellars. There the harbor master, accompanied by some city guards stopped them. It came to a fight in which most of the pirates were killed. However, the pirate prince managed to escape. Angered by the failure of his venture, he entered the harbor master's house and kidnapped his wife and maid. He sailed back to his city where he locked the two ladies in his private women's quarters.” She walked over to Azra, handed her the stick, suddenly realized that her shirt was probably showing through with the fire in the background and quickly set herself down.

“At the head of this enclosure was a woman who at birth had only been given the name 'girl’,” Azra, meanwhile, told. “She had spent her entire life in the service of the pirate king of whom she was actually a daughter. Girl soon noticed that the young woman's bosom was still leaking milk and understood the grief this young mother must be suffering. She took pity and convinced her half-brother to allow the two women time to adjust to their new lives.” Azra walked over to Dragomir and handed him the stick.

“Days became weeks and at Dol Amroth the young harbor master convinced his brothers and some friends to sail with him to the South of Gondor, to where the river Harnen flows into the bay. He hoped to find a way to free the two women from there. He left with favorable winds, but little hope.” Dragomir passed the stick to Biljana.

“Time passed in the pirate city, too,” Biljana said. “And the prince, still displeased with his failed stunt, summoned Rose to please him. Reluctantly, she complied with his request, but upon her return to the women's quarters, she begged Girl to help her and her maid escape. But escape was impossible, Girl told her. The prince kept the key to the outer door with him day and night. And what was worse: when one of them escaped, the others were punished. Our heroine, however, was determined. She convinced the other women to join her, and together they devised a ruse.” Biljana stopped and passed the stick to Mirna.

Mirna, who unlike her mother was fond of such stories, cleared her throat. “The maid, still adept at breaking in, was sent to the pantry from where she brought a bag of Bhangra weed, from Far Harad. Although the herb is used as an intoxicant, in large quantities it has a sleep-inducing effect. The next time the prince summoned Rose, she hid the bag of weed under her robe. As soon as she saw the chance, she threw the bag into the fire with which she generated a vapor that put the prince into a deep sleep. Quickly she took the keys and although she herself was sleepy from the herbal fumes she made it back to the women's quarters where she gathered all the women. Once they closed the outer gate behind them, they found themselves in a maze of small, dark streets. Even Girl, who had never left the castle before, didn't know which way to go.” Mirna handed the stick back to Azra.

“Meanwhile, the servants had found the prince,” Azra recounted. “As he slowly awoke from his sleep, the women finally found their way to the harbor. They got into the fishing boat with which Rose and her maid had been kidnapped and quietly rowed out of the harbor. From the water, they watched the pirates walking searchingly down the quay, but in the moonless night, the small sloop remained invisible. Only when they were many miles out to sea did they dare to hoist the sails.” Azra stood up, walked to prince Imahil, sat down beside him and handed him the stick.

The prince resumed speaking. "Two days later, by nightfall, the women sailed past the mouth of the Harnen. They had reached the southern border of Gondor. In a settlement beyond the mouth, they moored and found the harbor master there. He took Rose and the other women to his city."

Imrahil kindly squeezed Azra's arm. "And so Girl, or in her language 'Azra' came to Dol Amroth," he said.

Amazed voices sounded. "Azra, but that's you," cried Pippin. "So basically you are a pirate princess."

"Long ago perhaps," she said. "Now I'm the mistress of the bathhouse at Dol Amroth."

"The maid was rewarded for her part in the escape," Imrahil continued. "Of her own will, however, she remained in the service of the harbor master, and until today her descendants are maidservants to the descendants of Rose." Lothiriel spontaneously gave Mirna a kiss.

"Oh!" said Merry. He tapped his nose. "I see. Those offspring are Damirah and Mirna."

"Wait," said the prince. "There is more. The son Rose had to leave behind is Dragomir's father, who unfortunately died defending the city a few weeks ago. And when Rose gave birth to a daughter six months later, she named her 'weed', or in the ancient language of South Gondor 'Biljana.'"

Everyone was now talking interchangeably. The prince had to wait until the noise died away to finish his story. "The other women married or got jobs in the bathhouse or the house of care," he said. "Except them among themselves, no one spoke of their fortunes anymore." He looked for a moment at Erchirion, who suddenly looked very quiet. "Not even when many years later a grandson of Rose was born with striking black curls and deep brown eyes."

For a moment there was complete silence and then everyone burst out at once. "No," cried Pippin. "Erchirion is really a pirate."

"I knew it," Merry said.

"I got swimming lessons from a pirate," Sam stammered in amazement.

Groaning loudly, Erchirion jumped upright. With his bared upper body, wet curls and flashing eyes, he looked dangerous. It became silent and all eyes were on him. "May I remind you that I have no more or less pirate blood than my sister or my brothers," he said, "and only half that of my mother."

"How did it end with Rose, anyway?" said Éomer, who because of all the walking back and forth suddenly found himself sitting next to Lothiriel.

Lothiriel felt how all eyes now turned in her direction. "Rose, or 'Rhoswen' in the old language, lived happily ever after," she said. "And the grandson who looked so much like her captor was perhaps, of all her grandchildren, most dear to her." Quickly she blinked away her tears. "Just a few weeks ago she fought side by side with the other ladies present here. She died with sword in hand, having killed at least ten pirates."

"Then Dol Amroth is a heroine poorer," Éomer said.

Lothiriel looked at him, smiled sadly and nodded. "Yes," she said, "my grandmother was a real heroine."

"It's a beautiful story," said Gimli from across the fire.

"And it confirms that not everyone is what they seem," Erchirion said.

"What about that talking stick, anyway?" said Éomer after the meal was distributed. "I thought you were supposed to shut up when you got it."

Lothiriel smiled. "It is a trick of mother's to keep us from talking through each other, but I think you may use it as you wish."

"It's a good trick," he said, "though I fear it won't work on my men."

Lothiriel started laughing. "No, I'm afraid so, too."

As the meal progressed, their attention was increasingly distracted by the stories that spontaneously surfaced. The story from Dol Amroth was followed by stories from the Shire, Rohan and other parts of Middle-earth. As always, Lothiriel listened eagerly, and she resolved to write them down as soon as possible. There was a story about ents, moving and talking tree fathers. Pippin and Merry had stayed with them for a while and had gone to war with them. There were stories about the elven people of Rivendell, Lothlórien and the Demsterwold. And Gimli sang the praises of the magnificent caves of the Deep, which Lothiriel understood were in Rohan.

"There is so much beauty in the world," she told Éomer, "that it seems impossible to see it all in one lifetime."

"Then is that what you wish for yourself?" he said. "To leave your family to wander the world alone in search of all its wonders?"

"It is neither my wish to leave my family nor to wander around alone," she said. "But if my father has his way, there will come a day when I leave my city and my family behind to follow my husband. And with that in prospect, wanderlust seems very appealing." She looked at Gimli and Legolas on the other side of the fire. "Though I prefer to share any wonder with a companion."

"So you no longer wish to fight?" he said, with another deep wrinkle above his eyes.

"It was never my wish to fight," she said, "and certainly not to kill, I only wish to protect those whose care has been entrusted to me."

"No heroic stories about Lady Lothiriel of Dol Amroth?" he said.

"No," she said, "I leave it to others to play the hero, like to Erchirion the Impetuous, Legolas the Light-footed and Éomer the Protector of Woman and Horse."

Éomer looked at her in exasperation, but nevertheless burst into laughter. "Éomer the Protector of woman and horse," he said, "is that how you see me?"

Lothiriel shrugged her shoulders. "I could also describe you differently. How about Éomer the Frowned or Éomer the ..."

"I understand," he interrupted her. He looked at her defiantly. "I was thinking more along the lines of something like 'Éomer the Bringer of Hope and Peace'."

Lothiriel's gaze softened. "That would be nice," she said appreciatively. "Though I would say, 'Éomer the silent bringer of hope and peace, for you leave it to the dwarf to sing of your treasures.'" She looked at him obliquely. "Have you no stories about your country, then?"

"I could never describe it as beautifully as Gimli," he said, smiling. "But if your father permits, I would hereby invite you to accompany King Théoden to his final resting place in Edoras soon. That way you can admire the treasures of my country for yourself."

Lothiriel looked at him in amazement. "That is an invitation I gladly accept," she said. "And when I have beheld them, I will write stories about them."

Lothiriel lay twisting and turning under her blankets. Nevertheless, it was a gentle night, neither too hot nor too cold, and despite the steady thumping of the falls, it was quieter than most nights in the tent camp. She turned on her side and looked at the silhouette of Mirna, who lay beside her. It took her a moment to realize that Mirna was also awake and that she, in turn, was looking at Lothiriel.

"I saw you talking to King Éomer," Mirna said.

"He invited me to come with father to Rohan soon," Lothiriel said.

Mirna was startled, "So, are you coming?"

"I think so," Lothiriel said. "I'd like to see those glittering caves Gimli spoke of with my own eyes."

For a moment there was silence. "Are you sure King Éomer himself is not the reason you want to go to Rohan?" said Mirna.

"What do you mean?" asked Lothiriel.

Mirna sighed. "You seemed to get along well."

"As you said yourself, he's quite nice," Lothiriel said.

"Just a few days ago you thought he was stubborn and pedantic," Mirna said.

"Perhaps I misjudged him on our acquaintance."

"Mother thinks he's in love with you."

Lothiriel laughed uncomfortably. "I don't think King Éomer has time to be in love. Besides, I think Dragomir is in love with you."

"Dragomir misses Tihomir," Mirna said after a while. "And he knows I miss him, too."

"We all miss him in our own way," Lothiriel said. "Even if I am nice to a friend, I have not forgotten Tihomir."

It remained silent. After a while, Lothiriel turned over, but it was a long time before she fell asleep.

The moon was still in the sky when Éomer hurried out of his tent in search of a tree to empty his full bladder against. Only on the way back did he see that he was not the first to wake up. On a large, flat river stone, Gandalf was staring at the water. Without turning around, he greeted the young king and commanded him to take a seat. Éomer seated himself next to the old man. Together they watched the reflection of the moonlight on the lake. Although the water on their side of the lake only gently lapped against the banks, it fizzed and foamed on the other side, where the water plunged down violently and the falls enveloped themselves in a mist of water vapor. "This is a peaceful place, isn't it?" said Gandalf after a brief silence. "It reminds me of the lake in Aldburg."

"Aldburg?" said Éomer. "I didn't know you knew my hometown."

"I visited there long ago, when your parents were still alive," Gandalf said. "You were a little boy back then, hunting salamanders and then hiding them in your little sister's bed."

Éomer smiled at the memory. "Éowyn thought it was a baby dragon."

"What about your plans for Rohan, by the way?" asked Gandalf. "I suspect you've already thought about rebuilding your country."

Éomer nodded. "My marshals and I are working on it ... but it will be hard to empty all the needs and it is difficult to choose what is most urgent."

"Perhaps I can be a help to you in that?" said Gandalf.

"Gladly," said Éomer. "All help is welcome."

"Then I would advise you not to discuss your plans only with your army superiors. Take the time to listen to the common people as well. Those who provide food, shelter and clothing for your army." Éomer nodded. "And talk to the women," the wizard said after a brief silence. Éomer stopped nodding and looked at Gandalf questioningly. "Women," the wizard said, "are incredibly important in keeping the peace. As you have no doubt gathered from the pirate story, they have a habit of forging alliances. And that, my dear Éomer, is an important key to peace."

"Then I will also present my plans to my sister," the young king said.

"Good," said the old man. "Good ... but don't limit yourself to your sister. Even though she is not the least." He leaned toward Éomer. "From what I have heard, she may well want to leave Rohan soon."

Éomer sighed. "Yes, that's what I fear, too."

"Fortunately, there are other capable women," Gandalf said, nodding to Éomer encouragingly.

"The few I know talk too much and listen too little," Éomer said frowning.

"Then look closer," my friend. "He who looks best has the best chance of finding the grain of gold among the gravel." And with those words Gandalf stood up. "Consider my words. And do me a favor," he nodded toward the lake, "in the meantime, keep an eye on the water."

Éomer pondered Gandalf's words. He thought of his sister and of, what appeared to be, her reason for staying in the city. He had followed Lothiriel's advice a few days ago and written Éowyn a letter. A letter that had been answered by an equally brief copy that had been thrust at him the night before. Apparently Faramir, the Steward of Gondor, was more pleasant company than himself. With a sense of desolation, Éomer leaned his forehead on his hands. It was time for him to let Éowyn go her own way.

He was startled when he heard a splash across the lake, near the waterfall. From the ripple in the water, he understood that something underwater was slowly swimming in his direction. He jumped up just as a familiar face, framed by long, wet mane came to the surface. "By Eorl's horse," he said in surprise, "Lady Lothiriel, you really are a fish."

"And you have spent too much time with my brother, King Éomer," Lothiriel said, laughing nervously. She crawled out of the water as elegantly as she could.

Quickly Éomer grabbed the towel lying next to him on a river stone and held it out. "This is the second time you've appeared before me in your shirt," he said. "You know what they say, one is luck ..."

"Two is a coincidence and let's hope it stays that way," she interrupted him. She quickly dried her face and hair, wrapped the cloth around her body and sat down next to him. "I didn't expect to find someone here so early," she said. "May I ask you to be discreet about this morning swim?" She looked at him. "I don't want to upset my parents even more." He nodded

barely visible. "But I couldn't resist the temptation of the waterfall, and the water helps me sort out my confused thoughts," she said. She wrapped her arms around her upraised knees. "May I ask what your thoughts are so confused about?" he said.

Lothiriel hesitated. For a moment she considered withholding the truth from him, but she realized that in telling a lie she would soon fall through. "About you," she finally confessed. Éomer's eyes shot open in surprise. She looked at him uncomfortably. "Can I be honest," she asked. Éomer nodded. "I found you a rather ... rigid, stuck-up man in the beginning," she said. "And you often looked sullen. The rare times I saw you smile, it felt patronizing and your smile was limited to the corners of your mouth." She pointed to the corners of her own mouth. "But yesterday I saw you smiling full out and enjoying yourself. I wonder if your surliness has to do with your new responsibilities as king and if yesterday I saw a glimpse of the man you were before this task was placed on your shoulders." She looked at his face that was as if carved from stone and sighed. "And right now I'm wondering what's going on in your head and if, like last week at the campfire, I spoke too carelessly." The silence that followed felt uncomfortable. She bit her lip.

"Your words are rarely careless, Lothiriel," he finally said. "But they are not always the words your hearers want to hear. I had no idea that I ..." Another wrinkle appeared on his forehead, and Lothiriel felt the need to wipe it smooth. For safety's sake, she buried her hands under her buttocks.

"I fear the sullenness you speak of is much older than you assume. Though I would rather call it 'concern' myself," he said. "I've never thought about it before, but perhaps I became concerned when my parents died and I became responsible for my sister."

"How old were you then?" she asked.

"Eleven. My father died while attacking orcs and my mother followed him shortly after."

Lothiriel couldn't help but her heart went out to the little boy. "And then your sister and you were left alone?" she said.

"Uncle Théoden took us in," he said. "I found it hard to adjust to my new environment. Without my cousin Théodred and my sister, I would never have succeeded."

"You must love each other a lot."

He looked at her in silence for a while. "My heart broke when I found her on the battlefield. I thought she was dead. All I wished at that moment was to die like her in battle." His voice was no more than a whisper.

She thought about her grief for Tihomir. "Is love worth the pain of loss?" she wondered aloud.

"Éowyn has long been the most important thing in my life," he said. "But I realize now that you are right. That it is selfish to bind her to me. Whatever path she wishes to take, I will accept her choice." He looked at her. "And to answer your question, yes, her love was worth it. I feel grateful that she was there all along."

Lothiriel wiped away the tears that suddenly overwhelmed her. "Grandma Rhoswen's last words were that I should never be afraid to love," she said after a while. "As if she knew then ..."

Éomer squeezed her hand gently. "I am truly sorry that you lost both your grandmother and your friend."

Lothiriel looked at him waterily. "My grandmother was always my great heroine. As a child, we often reenacted her escape from Umbar." She smiled at the memory. "I only realized how

brave she had been when I came face to face with the pirates myself ... and when I heard the stories of their captives." She lowered her eyes and saw that she had unconsciously intertwined her fingers through his. With an apologetic look, she unhooked them back. "What is it like in Rohan now?" she asked after a while. "Is it safe now?"

"I should hope so," Éomer said. "We fought hard for that with many. The big work now, is to rebuild."

"But you don't have to do that alone, do you?" she said.

Éomer shook his head. "No, fortunately not."

"So there is hope?"

"Yes," Éomer looked at Lothiriel and smiled. "There is hope." His smile widened and his young face glowed as the morning sun slowly rose behind him. From his side, Éomer watched as the early sunlight turned Lothiriel's beautiful features to gold.

After a communal breakfast, they all helped break down and pack up the tents so that the city guards could return to camp with the rest of the party. Lothiriel watched Dragomir maneuver his horse next to Mirna's and led Lysippe toward Erchirion.

"Are you still mad at me?" he asked as soon as she rode up beside him.

Lothiriel shook her head. "It's hard to stay mad at you," she said. "But on the next outing, I'll bring extra clothes."

He grinned. "A beautiful woman like you shines even in her shirt."

Lothiriel's face tightened. "Is that how you see me," she asked, "as a beautiful woman?"

"To me you will always be my little sister, but if I may judge by the judgment of my friends, you are quite attractive."

Lothiriel looked at him in disgust. "Have you been gossiping about me?" Erchirion coughed. Unconsciously, Lothiriel's gaze wandered to Éomer, who was just turning to answer a question from Merry, who was sitting at his back. Their gazes hooked together for a moment, then she lowered her eyes and swallowed.

"Everything seems to be pointing in the same direction," she said after quite a while. "I just can't seem to escape the role I have to play."

"We have responsibilities as the prince's children," Erchirion said. "And I have no doubt that if you had eventually married Tihomir, father would have given him a task as well."

"What is your task anyway?" she said.

"The same as yours," he said. "Though the absence of suitable, high-born women gives me more leeway as far as my marriage is concerned." His eyes shone mischievously. "Much more leeway."

Lothiriel laughed. "Perhaps you should consider a suitable, high-born man."

"Haha, good try," he said.

From the bustle in the horse pasture, Lothiriel noticed that the atmosphere in camp had changed during their brief absence. As she helped unsaddle the horses, she saw the ferriers at the edge of the meadow loading their conveniences onto their carts. The riders would return to Minas Tirith the very next day and all the horses had to go with them.

"But the black mare has not fully recovered," she told Erchirion.

"Unless you want to transport her by ship, she will have to come with us," he said. He took his saddle and walked away.

"With a light rider and no pack, it should work," said Éomer standing next to her.

Lothiriel frowned. "And who will ride Lysippe now that I have to take the boat and Amrothos is in town?"

"There are plenty of riders whose horses died. We'll find someone for her. We'll take good care of her." The corners of his mouth curled as he leaned toward her. "I'll leave the door to her stable ajar."

Lothiriel clucked her tongue, but laughed nonetheless. "I know you will take good care of her," she said as she pushed her saddle into his hands. "As a show of confidence, you may even help me clean up her things." She walked out of the pasture and left it to Éomer to follow her. This time it was the corners of her mouth that curled.

Éomer hesitated. He had been in doubt all day, and now that he thought about it, he had to admit that he had been in doubt for days. The knot had to be tied, sooner rather than later. Tomorrow he would leave the camp behind and in Minas Tirith everything would be different. There was Éowyn, with whom he intended to have a long and serious conversation. There was work to do, preparation work for the transfer of King Théoden's body, and there was distraction in the form of a coronation and a feast. No, if he wanted to make his case, it had to be today. He jumped off his bed and took a few determined steps. But was he sure of his case? This was not something to be decided lightly. He retraced his steps and sat back down on his bed. Sure was that he thought about her constantly, that she sometimes angered and frustrated him, that she amused, intrigued and completely overwhelmed him. Sure was that she was beautiful, sweet, articulate, feisty and sometimes downright impressive. How certain did you have to be, he wondered groaningly, to know she was the one? One of the guards poked his head through the tent flap. "Is everything all right King Éomer?"

Éomer looked at him foolishly. "Yes ... no," he shook his head and stood up briskly. "I have another urgent thing to do," he said after which he knocked the man over on his way out.

After four weeks of rest, the soldiers resumed their discipline only with much resistance, making the departure longer than anticipated. The war had caused many casualties, and the redistribution of the remaining horses was chaotic.

"This is my second cousin Éolif and his friend Folca," Éomer said to Lothiriel as they finally got ready to leave. Éolif was no older than Lothiriel but, like Éomer, was tall and broadly built. She recognized him as one of Éomer's guards. Folca seemed younger, though perhaps that was because he was small and petite. "Éolif will ride with Lysippe and Folca will get the mare you freed from her abscess. He belongs to the shepherd people of East Emnet and grew up among horses."

Lothiriel hugged her horse one last time. "Lysippe is fast, but not always docile," she told Éolif, "She will test you at first." Beside her, Éomer cleared his throat and she looked at him in wonder.

“Unlike her owner,” he said, trying to pull his face into a crease.

“I can be quite docile,” she said wryly. “If the person I’m supposed to follow is trustworthy and sensible.”

“And handles things as you wish,” laughed Erchirion, who was just coming up.

Lothiriel squeezed her eyes to slits. “I wish I could say I was looking forward to seeing you back in Minas Tirith,” she said. “But as things stand, I prefer the company of Cousin Faramir.” She turned to the two younger men. “In you, on the other hand, I have full confidence. I wish you a pleasant journey and see you soon.” She turned and walked with her head held high to her parents who were saying goodbye a little further on.

Not much later, the line of riders began to move with Prince Imrahil and Erchirion in the lead. Despite her brother's teasing, Lothiriel threw him a kissing hand. She waved to the city guards following them and bowed as Aragorn and Éomer rode by. She would not see the horsemen again until the day of the coronation. As with the exodus from Dol Amroth two months ago, their departure saddened her.

In contrast, the soldiers who remained behind looked forward expectantly to King Elessar's coronation and cheerfully cleared the camp. Everything was loaded into boats that carried materials and soldiers to Minas Tirith for three days, until only the flattened grass revealed that thousands of soldiers had camped here for a month. Lothiriel helped where she could, and slowly a sense of expectation grew in her too. Three days after the horsemen left, she cast one last glance at the Shadow Mountains, then she stepped onto the boat. She was on her way to Minas Tirith, to the coronation of the first king in thousands of years.

VI. A long-awaited coronation

The impending coronation caused the city to fill up with people from all over the country. Although her parents were given a guest room in the citadel's private quarters, Lothiriel shared her room with Azra, Damirah and Mirna. Since their conversation in the tent at Hanneth Annûn, Lothiriel had felt that Mirna looked at her suspiciously. They still socialized amicably, but sought each other's company less often. Upon their arrival in Minas Tirith, Mirna quickly went in search of Dragomir, who had arrived a day earlier. Lothiriel looked for her cousin Faramir and found him in the Houses of Healing, in the company of Lady Éowyn.

“It is an honor to renew our acquaintance,” she said. “At our last meeting, I had no knowledge of the great deeds you have done.”

Éowyn smiled. “The magnitude of my deeds depends on who tells them,” she said. “Who did you hear about it from?”

“From Merry and your brother Éomer,” Lothiriel said. “Though the latter expressed particular concern about your injuries and your absence from the camp.”

“Éomer is always worried,” Éowyn said. “I hope that now that the war has been won, he may live at least one day in joy and without worry.”

"Then I think your wish may already have been granted. For on our visit to Henneth Annûn, I saw him laughing out loud several times, and he was also very relaxed at the campfire in the evening," Lothiriel said.

Éowyn looked at her happily surprised. "Then your company has brought him more joy than mine has in a long time," she said.

Lothiriel's cheeks suddenly turned red. "I doubt that," she said, "because your brother loves you. Besides, we were not alone there, but enjoyed the company of many friends. And no doubt the beauty of the landscape also contributed to the positive atmosphere." She looked at her cousin. "The waterfalls are really beautiful and the lake is very refreshing."

Faramir and Éowyn exchanged glances. "Am I right in thinking that you are the one who got my brother to write me a letter?" said Éowyn.

"I ... We did talk about it," Lothiriel nodded with cheeks still glowing.

Éowyn grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "Thank you," she said smiling. "It was the first time I got a message from him that consisted of more than two sentences."

"Come," Faramir said as he stood up. "I have much work to do. And there is a task in which you can help me." Moments later, Lothiriel and Éowyn walked through the crowded streets, looking for the musicians who had come to Minas Tirith from all over the country. In addition to the harp players from Dol Amroth, there were musicians with drums, fiddles, flutes and silver horns. They found most of them gathered in one of the city's squares where they made music together. They gave them Faramir's instructions and stayed a while to enjoy the atmosphere and the music.

Also the next day, Lothiriel helped with the practical organization of the festivities surrounding the coronation. The women from Dol Amroth helped a group of women from Minas Tirith to clean and decorate Merethron, the citadel's main banquet hall. An elevation was built for the musicians, colored banners were hung. Tables were lined with white linen sheets on which painted earthenware plates and wine chalices blown from glass were placed. Numerous candlesticks and vases with freshly picked flowers provided light and color.

When word came shortly after noon that the horsemen had also arrived and were setting 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. But 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, Éomer and Prince Imrahil in the middle. Their flags and banners fluttered gently in the wind. From behind the city wall, Lothiriel watched the bustle at the foot of the city, and she wished she was part of it like in Itilien. It was already beginning to dusk when she finally went in search of the other women in her company, ending up in her room where she found Amrothos.

"Hello brother," Lothiriel said. She looked at him in surprise.

"Hello sister," he said as if he had completely forgotten the tense atmosphere of their last conversation. "I come with instructions from father. He is asking me to join the army in the telt camp." He looked at the piece of paper he was holding. "And you must stay here, but he asks you to wear your uniform tomorrow."

Astonished, Lothiriel snatched the paper from his hands. With growing disappointment, she read her father's words. What was the point of putting on her uniform when he clearly still

did not see her as a worthy part of the army? How seriously did he really take the training of female soldiers?

"There's no reason to look so glum," Amrothos said. "Probably you will get to see more of the spectacle than I will." On his way to the door, he turned. "Congratulations, by the way."

"How do you know about that," she said. "Father wanted to keep it a secret for a while longer." Amrothos threw her a mysterious look and then pulled the door shut behind him. Lothiriel lowered herself onto her bed and opened her case with a sigh. She had a role to play tomorrow. She lifted her chest armor and began to shine it on.

Later that evening, the women enjoyed the expectant atmosphere that could be felt throughout the city. Despite the damage and debris, residents had decorated their homes with flowers and numerous lights giving the city something fairy-like. Music was played in the squares, songs were sung and tricks were shown. Salvi's sons had joined some musicians from Lebennin and together they played cheerful, danceable tunes in a square with a fountain. Like dozens of townspeople, Lothiriel and Mirna were easily persuaded to dance. They clapped, turned, swung, swayed and bowed until their faces blushed. Biljana and Azra followed and even the withdrawn Damirah ventured a few dance steps. "You guys are coming back tomorrow night, right?" asked Salvi's eldest son when the ladies finally made their preparations to leave. "Tomorrow is the real party."

Reluctantly, they made their way to their quarters. On the way, Mirna hooked her arm through Lothiriel's. "Tomorrow will be the most beautiful day ever," she said with a dreamy look. Lothiriel smiled and with one last longing glance at the equally lit tent camp at the foot of the city, she closed the door and crawled into bed.

Éomer grabbed panickedly into his suitcase. The city's bells were already ringing; he had to hurry. "Éolif," he cried, "where is my cloak?"

Éolif approached. "I brushed him off some more," he said as he helped Éomer into his cloak. "The men are ready."

Hurriedly, the young king walked to the front row where Aragorn and Imrahil were waiting for him. "Shall we leave?" said Imrahil. The two others nodded. Imrahil patted Aragorn comradely on the shoulder. "Enjoy your last steps as a free man," he said. Aragorn grinned, but his eyes betrayed his nervousness. Éomer sympathized with him. Being king was not so bad as long as you had an experienced rotter around like Imrahil, or a wizard like Gandalf. But 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 Steward of Gondor, was waiting for them. The entire city had gathered around him, but Éomer had his eyes mainly on the young, blond woman beside Faramir. He looked at his sister and smiled. His love for her was greater, than when they parted more than a month ago. She reciprocated his smile in a way as if she felt the same. He felt relieved and happy at the same time. Then his gaze slid to the person next to her. It was an elf warrior; tall and slender, proud and

powerful, clad in chain mail and a golden chest armor. The reflected sunlight surrounded both the warrior, and Éowyn with a golden glow. Only when the warrior turned to face him did Éomer see that it was not an elf, but Lothiriel showing herself in all her strength as captain of captains. Her casualness of camp had given way to a controlled, proud demeanor that exuded calm authority. He understood now that the soldiers of Dol Amroth loved her not only because she was beautiful and a woman, but because, like her father, she had the charisma of a born leader. He would follow her, he thought. If he were a soldier of Dol Amroth, he would follow her into the darkest caverns of Sauron.

He averted his gaze just in time to see Gandalf being handed the crown by Frodo before solemnly placing it on Aragorn's head. King Elessar's reign could begin. Cries of joy and applause rose from the crowd. Éomer's heart burst with excitement and joy.

Biljana helped Lothiriel out of her chest armor. "Now that you have done what your father told you to do," she said, "you must perform one more task for me." Lothiriel looked at her mother suspiciously. "I instruct you to put on your new dress and have fun," Biljana said. Lothiriel laughed. "Your orders are always more fun than father's," she said. "I will gladly carry them out." Excited as a child, she put on her blue-and-silver dress that was an exact copy of her mother's except for the patterns of embroidery.

Biljana sprinkled her with lavender water and braided her own silver crown of flowers through Lothiriel's hair. "Much better," she said as she looked at her daughter approvingly. She hooked her arm through Lothiriel's. "Come," she said, "we are already late for our appointment."

Lothiriel giggled as they noticed both men and women turning their heads to look at them admiringly on their way to the banquet hall. Smiling, the two of them appeared at the gate of Merethrond where most of the invited guests had already taken their seats.

King Elessar had surrounded himself at the head table with the captains of the army and the members of his fellowship. Prince Imrahil beckoned to them and the two ladies traversed the great hall. Lothiriel felt that everyone was watching them and searched with her eyes for familiar faces. At one of the front side tables she saw Erchirion sitting and a few chairs away Lady Éowyn sat next to an older man. They walked past the elevation with the musicians where Salvi's oldest son nodded at her admiringly. She smiled back nervously. Before the table of honor they bowed to their new king. King Elessar grinned approvingly at them. Only then did Lothiriel notice that sitting next to him was King Éomer. His gaze made her shyly lower her eyes. She had been looking for him, this morning during the ceremony. But it had taken her a while to recognize him in his king's robe, and after that he had not left King Elessar's side.

While Biljana was given a seat next to her husband, Lothiriel was led to the side table where she took a seat next to her brother. From there, she watched Éomer. He was the king of Rohan, she reminded herself. Like her, he too had a role to play.

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 one of Éomer's marshals, and along with Lady Éowyn he had entertained Erchirion and Lothiriel with stories from Rohan. 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 stopped, the musicians packed up their instruments and the first guests left.

"There is a folk festival in the square with the fountain," Lothiriel told Erchirion. "There is music and dancing. Mirna and Dragomir would go to it."

"I can hear you coming," Erchirion said. "You want to go there, too, and I may escort you."

"Of course you may escort me. But I think it's safe enough to go alone," she said.

Erchirion pursed his lips. "For a folk festival, I gladly sacrifice myself," he said. "Especially when there's dancing."

Elfhelm and Lady Éowyn expressed their desire to join King Éomer's company. And so Erchirion and Lothiriel, with the blessing of their parents, left for the feast. The banquet had been long and it was already dusk when they arrived in the square. Like the night before, it was lit up with numerous lights and the band was playing folk music. The place was crowded, but very pleasant. While Erchirion fetched a mug of beer for the two of them, Lothiriel looked for Mirna and Dragomir. As it turned out, they were not alone. Several city guards had joined them, and Lothiriel was soon asked to dance. The twirling and waving made her elated, and cheerfully she clapped her hands and sang along every time she recognized a song. To her surprise, she saw Damirah dancing with Captain Goran.

Erchirion asked her to dance to a song that involved frequent partner changes, foot stomping and the lyrics of which were easy to sing along with. After their dance, he pulled her along to the musicians' elevation. "It's time for a song from Dol Amroth," he told Salvi's son. A moment later, the musicians set the song about Amroth and Nimrodel. Their story was tragic and the original version of the song sad. But Silva's sons had made a parody of it years ago that had been played and sung along at every party in Dol Amroth ever since. Erchirion jumped onto the elevation, pulled Lothiriel along and exhorted her to sing along with the musicians as he did. Encouraged by the revelry, Lothiriel allowed herself to be persuaded. Together with the fellow townspeople present, she was just singing how Amroth, tired of his lover's nagging, threw himself off the cliffs, when she saw familiar faces appear at the edge of the square. Not only her parents, but the entire company of King Elessar stood listening to the folk interpretation of the legend about the creation of Dol Amroth, sung by the prince's son and daughter. As a warning, Lothiriel stepped on Erchirion's foot. The latter promptly began to improvise, which naturally led to a sung dialogue between the audience, who adhered to the parody, and Erchirion, who commented on behalf of the prince and corrected the people. This latest version struck a chord with the audience and at the end of the song, laughter and enthusiastic applause rang out. From the elevation, Lothiriel looked at her father who was applauding along just as enthusiastically. She exchanged a look of relief with her brother and then pushed him off the stage in front of her.

"That was a version I haven't heard before," Prince Imrahil said as they joined him. Lothiriel bit her lip.

"It's the very latest, a first especially for the coronation," Erchirion said.

"Well, let's add another scoop for the occasion then," Imrahil said, smiling. He turned to his daughter. "Lady Lothiriel, will you do me the honor of dancing with me?" Lothiriel looked at her father in astonishment. "Come, do not dawdle," he said grabbing her hand, "this happens to be the only dance I know." A moment later she was elegantly spinning circles with her father, feeling for a moment like the little girl of old again.

As Lothiriel danced with her father, King Elessar's company dispersed across the square. The townspeople were delighted by his presence. Some admired him from a distance, but a few clung to him, quickly isolating him from the rest. The one who also isolated himself, Lothiriel saw, was King Éomer. After Famamir and Éowyn said goodbye to him, he retreated to the edge of the square. Leaning against the city wall, he observed the dancing crowd from the dusk.

The dance ended, Prince Imrahil kissed his daughter on her forehead and joined his wife. Lothiriel walked over to the young king and stood silently beside him. She was hot and stretched her neck to catch the fresh breeze that blew gently over the city wall.

"That was an interesting performance," he said amused.

"You mean the part where Erchirion and I perfectly discharged our duties as pacemakers of the party?" She smiled. "Why are you around every time we fall out of character and ridicule ourselves?" she said.

"I don't find you ridiculous at all," he said, looking at her from the side. "Rather, I find you impressive."

Lothiriel drew big eyes. He seemed to mean what he said. "Then you think too well of me, King Éomer." In silence they watched the feast in the square. "Don't you dance?" she asked after a while. "Or is there no dancing in Rohan?"

"Yes, there is dancing," he said. "But dancing isn't exactly my talent."

Lothiriel looked at him obliquely. "Have you ever tried it?"

"As a small boy, with my mother."

"A long time ago, then."

He shrugged. "I never felt it as a loss," he said. "Until now. If I could, I'd love to dance with you."

Lothiriel smiled. "In that case, I would be happy to be at your service."

They looked at each other in silence, then he turned his back to the square. "I barely recognized you in your armor earlier."

Lothiriel also turned around. "Strange," she said. "I had the same experience." She stared at the stars above the Shadow Mountains. "I was looking for a horse master, but he had hidden under a king's cloak."

Éomer looked at her in agony. "I AM a king, Lothiriel. That is the task assigned to me and one that I will soon take up officially."

Lothiriel saw the wrinkle appear on his forehead and took his hand. "And you will be a good king, Éomer. You are brave, righteous," she turned the palm of her hand to his, "and not too shy to question your own opinion." She now took his other hand as well, and rocking to the beat of the music, she pushed both of their arms up until they were facing each other with arms outstretched. Éomer looked at her expectantly. "And provided some practice," she said with a mischievous smile, "you'll become a fine dancer, too." She twisted herself under their arms and ended up with her back against his chest and their arms crossed over her belly. "Which doesn't necessarily make you a better king," she said, looking at him over her shoulder, "but which is nice at ..." The intensity of Éomer's gaze paralyzed her. She swallowed. For a moment it looked like he was going to kiss her, then with a sigh he broke eye contact, pulled her even closer to him and buried his face in her hair.

Lothiriel felt his heart beating against her back. Still paralyzed, she remained standing, then she gently flattened her head against his chest and closed her eyes.

Meanwhile, the party in the square continued. People danced, sang, made music and drank. And the innkeeper sent his servants out for a new ale barrel lying on a cart, at the edge of the square. The servants loosened the ropes and lowered the barrel from the cart, then, due to the slope of the square, it rolled away by itself ... toward the city wall. Lothiriel and Éomer were startled by the shouts of some bystanders, each jumped in a different direction and managed to narrowly avoid the barrel before it shattered.

A rush ensued and they got separated. When they finally found each other again, in the company of their friends and relatives, only their occasional eye contact betrayed what had taken place between them at the city wall.

Lothiriel had been lying for some time listening to the sleeping sounds of the other women when she decided to get up. Silently she took her cloak and snuck outside. She walked to the end of the street, where, from a stone bench, she smilingly watched the sun rise red in the east. Still smiling, after a while she walked on until she reached the stables where she found not only her horse but also Amrothos. He was in the company of a young woman. There was straw sticking in their hair and clothing and it was obvious that she had caught them at a private party. She tried to ignore them and walked on to Lysippe who greeted her whinnying. "I can trust you will not say anything about this to our parents?" said Amrothos who suddenly stood behind her.

Lothiriel looked at her brother thoughtfully. "Of course," she said. "Have I ever betrayed you?" Amrothos grinned. "You might want to make a good turn with father now that you will soon be queen."

"What are you talking about?"

"Éomer's marriage proposal," he said. "You no longer have to keep it a secret. Father and he talked about it and you gave it away yourself the day before yesterday." He looked at her appreciatively. "I must admit, sister, that he is a much better catch than Derufin."

With horror, Lothiriel looked at her brother. "I don't know what you heard ... and what else you made up," she said. "But I have no ambition whatsoever to become a queen." She turned and walked out of the stable.

"That's beyond father and King Éomer then," he called after her. "Just be prepared."

Lothiriel walked through the steep streets to her room. The laughter had faded from her by now.

Lothiriel tried to ignore Mirna's angry look. Silently she pulled her dress over her head and turned her back. Mirna snapped at the laces and squeezed Lothiriel so hard she gasped. "Say what you have to say," Lothiriel said angrily, "but stop mistreating me."

"How dare you," Mirna burst out. "How dare you flirt so openly with King Éomer, as if ... as if Tihomir meant nothing to you." She snorted, "I did see you, yesterday in the square. And I don't think I was the only one who saw how you forced yourself on him."

Over her shoulder, Lothiriel looked at her in surprise. "What do you mean, that I forced myself on him?"

"The way you walked up to him, danced with him and threw yourself into his arms," Mirna said. Her face was twisted with disdain. "You seemed to have lost your mind."

"I didn't throw myself into his arms," Lothiriel said.

"That's what I saw," Mirna said stubbornly.

Lothiriel lowered herself onto her bed and pulled on her stockings. "I did not forget Tihomir," she said. "And I did not force myself on King Éomer. But you are right when you say I did not behave wisely."

Mirna opened Lothiriel's trunk and grabbed out a roll of parchment with a red ribbon around it. "Here," she said, "maybe this will bring your mind back." Angrily, she threw the scroll onto Lothiriel's lap. Lothiriel recognized it immediately. "And maybe this can bring you to your senses." With a thud, Mirna set the jewelry box with Tihomir's ashes on the bed. His portrait she threw on top. "*I love you, more than myself*," she said. "What a lie!" She left and slammed the door behind her.

Lothiriel looked at Tihomir's portrait. It was thumbed and torn, but his face was still recognizable. She let her fingers slide over his face. Tears dripped down his cheeks, as if he were crying. She slid the ribbon off her letter and reread the words she had written in Itilien. *'I miss your silence, your heartbeat, your laughter. I even miss your anger, your disappointment.'*

Her wet fingers followed the words and wiped them out.

'Whenever the world overwhelms me or my task is too heavy, I seek you beside me. Whenever I mess up or stubbornly push my way, I seek you beside me. You showed me who I am, like a mirror; my strength and my shortcomings. You took it for granted, always standing beside me.'

Lothiriel let herself fall backward onto her bed and rolled up. She had messed up, messed up terribly. She had been blind and deaf ... and above all very stupid. How she had disappointed him. How she had disappointed herself. And wherever he was, he was certainly no longer beside her. She was alone.

Éomer opened the flap of his tent. The sky was blue, the sun was shining, the world was smiling at him. Both Imrahil and Aragorn had taken up residence in the quarters of the citadel since the coronation, while he had chosen the comfort of his tent and the company of his men. But now, as he walked smilingly into the city, he wished he was staying closer to Lothiriel. He walked up the steps to the house where she was staying. The door was ajar and he knocked on it to announce his arrival. Mirna met him in the hallway. She looked bedraggled. "Is Lothiriel here," he asked.

Mirna shook her head. "She was upset this morning," she said as she opened the room door for him. "I don't know where she is, but she made quite a mess." Éomer looked around and saw what she meant. Three of the four beds were neatly made. The fourth was a chaos of parchment, paper and clothes. A small, leather-trimmed chest stood open on the bed.

"What is this?" he asked as he looked at the contents.

Mirna looked at him sullenly. "Ashes," she said. "From Tihomir."

Éomer stepped back. "As I said, she was upset," Mirna said as she rearranged the collar of her dress. "She also brought out his portrait and the letter she wrote to him."

Éomer looked at the portrait lying next to the box. It was a drawing of a young fellow, younger than himself. His features were regular and his smile radiated confidence. The portrait itself was thumbed, torn, faded here and there and wet. Wet from Lothiriel's tears, he suspected. "Is this your brother?" he asked.

Mirna avoided his gaze. "They loved each other a lot. She misses him." Mirna took the roll of parchment. "It's all in here, in the letter she wrote him after he died."

Éomer recognized the red ribbon wrapped around the scroll and raised his eyebrow. "If she wrote the letter for your brother, it's a confidential document," he said. "Put it in her chest, along with the rest. I'm going to look for her." A moment later he was outside again. The sky was blue and the sun was still shining, but his smile had given way to worry wrinkles.

Lothiriel had indeed been upset, he suspected. But not just because of the loss of Tihomir. She had been upset because of him. Hadn't Imrahil warned him not to rush things? There is no greater rival in love than a dead hero, he had said. And yet Éomer had acted hastily yesterday. Haphazardly he was walking through the streets, wondering ever more desperately how he could find Lothiriel in this great city, when Folca, Éolif's friend, came running toward him.

"King Éomer," he said after which he stopped for a moment to catch his breath, "Lady Lothiriel has taken Lysippe. She was very upset."

"Where did she ride to?" said Éomer as he followed Folca to the stables.

Folca shrugged. "She drove out of town toward the river."

Éomer stiffened. "Saddle a horse," he said. "Any which. I'm going after her."

Lothiriel fiddled with the laces of her boots. She was just pulling off her stockings when she heard the rhythmic sound of a horse galloping behind her. She looked over her shoulder. Éomer! She groaned. She couldn't face him. Not yet. She walked to the water and carefully groped the river stones with her feet. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Éomer jump off his horse. Swept up by his nearness, she waded further into the cold water.

"Don't do it Lothiriel! The river is too wild and cold," shouted Éomer from the bank.

"She's barely cold enough to dispel my despair," she called out without turning around. She stood on a large, flat stone. The water foamed and churned wildly around her legs. She felt it pull and push at her. She hesitated.

"Lothiriel, city guard of Dol Amroth, even Prince Imrahil's daughter does not have eternal life. Come out of the river before you drown."

She turned and looked at Éomer in surprise. He was balancing in the water with boots on, ready to grab her. "Those are Mirna's words," she said. "How do you know ..."

Éomer sighed. "I saw you bathing in the camp one early morning. I heard splashing," his gaze had something desperate, "and laughter that reminded me of my mother. As I approached the river I saw the sweetest creature I had ever seen." Lothiriel grasped his outstretched hand and allowed herself to be pulled onto the bank. "You've hardly been out of my thoughts since then," he said as she stood before him. "I love you." With wide eyes, she looked at him. "I know you still love Tihomir," he said, "and that I can never take his place, but is it wrong of me to hope that a day will come when you will love me too?"

Lothiriel's lip quivered. "That day has already come, Éomer, for I love you already. But it is only a spell, conjured by myself to forget the terror and suffering of war." Her eyes filled with tears. "For what a worthless friend would I be otherwise, if I loved another man so soon after Tihomir's death?" She wiped away her tears. "But the betrayal of my heart goes beyond that. In my thoughtlessness, I led not only myself but also you into the delusion that there was a future for us. While I promised my father and King Elessar some time ago to train the women of South Gondor so that, in the absence of their husbands, they could defend themselves." "Is that why you appeared at the coronation in full armor?" said Éomer in surprise. He grasped her hand. "Yet neither your father nor Aragorn will require you to keep your word when they know we love each other. Neither of them has any desire to separate us." "So it's true?", Lothiriel pulled her hand free and took a step back. "It is true that there is a marriage agreement between you and my father." Alarmed, Éomer shook his head. "There is no agreement. The only thing your father was willing to agree to is to allow me to court you." "And why wasn't I informed of that?" "Because your heart was still overflowing with grief for Tihomir." Lothiriel looked at him angrily. "Is it too much to ask to be heard or even informed of plans about my future?" She pushed her chin up. "Like you, I keep my given word. And like you, I feel responsible for those entrusted to me. I see it as my duty to teach women how to protect themselves from the monsters of Umbar," she said. A stubborn twitch had appeared around her mouth. Éomer raised his eyebrow. "I don't need a captain, Lothiriel. I have need of a queen." His voice sounded sharp. "I know that," she said. "And I wish with all my heart that you find someone who loves you and stands beside you in your task as king." "Is that the last word you have to say on this?" he said. Lothiriel forced back her tears and nodded.

How she had finally made it back to town, she could not remember afterwards. She did remember Folca; how, when she came into the stable, he had helped her dismount and had sent her away with the promise that he would take care of Lysippe. When she returned to her room, she laid down on her bed, pulled a blanket over her and fell asleep.

The ship flapped rudderlessly from wave to wave. The sky was black, with threatening clouds full of rain. Not a star was in sight. Although Lothiriel and Mirna clung to one of the masts, the shock of another wave flung them away. Through the pelting rain, Lothiriel watched as Mirna disappeared over the edge of the ship and she screamed. Desperately, she tried to free herself from the tangle of ropes in which she had fallen, trying to crawl to Tihomir who lay some distance away. But it seemed the ropes were holding her back. When she finally reached him, he felt cold and stiff. Crying, she lowered herself beside him, pulled him into her arms and cradled him like a child. On the other side of the ship, she saw Éomer turning the helm with a possessed look. A sudden flash of light blinded her. For a moment there was complete silence,

then with a creaking sound the mast fell down. She called out to warn Éomer. A dull bang and more creaking followed. Dragging Tihomir's lifeless body with her, she crawled on her hands and knees across the slippery deck toward Éomer. But he had disappeared. Bewildered, she looked at the remnants of the splintered mast, the mountain of sailcloth and the gigantic wave coming at her.

Lothiriel sputtered under the wet cloth her mother rubbed over her face. "You really need to get out of bed now," Biljana said. "You can't keep hiding forever." She pulled away the blankets. "Your father is getting the ship ready. In two days we can leave already." Lothiriel looked at her mother, confused. Biljana sighed. "But before you leave, you must say goodbye to everyone."

Lothiriel drew big eyes. "How could I ever ..."

"To everyone, Lothiriel," her mother said sternly before leaving the room, "including King Éomer."

Lothiriel filled the next two days packing her things and, as instructed, saying goodbye to her new friends. Most of them she would probably never see again, she realized. And especially with Merry and Pippin, that realization fell hard on her.

"I wish you all the very best for all the days of your further life," she said, "and I hope those days may be many." She handed them each a bag with the last scraps of dried seaweed. "This is for in your bath, not in your pipe." The memory of their seaweed bath conjured a smile on the faces of all three.

"I wish I could give you something in return, Lady Lothiriel," Merry said. "But we have been on the road so long that all our resources have dried up."

"You already gave me some fine memories," Lothiriel said as she hugged them. "I will never forget you guys."

Then she visited Lady Éowyn, but the sight of Éomer's sister seemed to paralyze her tongue. "I am terribly sorry," she finally managed to exclaim. She thrust a vial of lavender oil into her hands.

Éowyn's gaze softened. "I admire your choice," she said, "but I'm sorry, too." Then she took Lothiriel's hand. "Still, I want to thank you, because my brother and I talk more openly to each other now than ever before." Lothiriel smiled, but tears pricked her eyes.

The reunion with Éomer himself was made all the more difficult by the presence of others who tried conspicuously to ignore them. They met in the stables, where Lothiriel had walked to say goodbye to Folca and to Lysippe.

"I hear you are already leaving tomorrow," Éomer said when they finally faced each other uncomfortably. "Then I would hereby like to wish you a safe journey, and invite you once again to visit Rohan."

Surprised, Lothiriel batted her eyes. "Thank you," she stammered. "I also wish you a good journey. Farewell, King Éomer."

"Goodbye, Lothiriel," he said.



PART 3

VII. The Women's Company

"One more," Biljana said as they walked up the stairs, "one that I'm not looking forward to." Lothiriell looked at her mother questioningly. "Danica," Biljana said, "the mapmaker's daughter."

"That's terrible," Lothiriell said, halfway up the stairs she remained standing. "She was married less than a week before the attack."

Biljana nodded. "War, unfortunately, makes no distinction." At the top of the stairs, they walked into the street where the mapmaker had his workshop. As after the pirates' attack, the two women visited the families of fallen soldiers. Fathers, sons, brothers, each victim caused grief and they had comforted, soothed and hugged many that day. The colorful flags that had been hung in celebration of Danica's wedding, now two months ago, still hung over

the street. Mother and daughter walked underneath and knocked on the door. It was Danica herself who opened the door. She gulped as she recognized the two women.

"Shall we go inside," Biljana suggested. Danica walked ahead of them, down a dark hallway to a studio that was remarkably bright because of the large windows at the back of the house. In the studio were two large tables. On one were large sheets of paper and all sorts of strange measuring instruments; on the other were maps in various stages of completion.

"I've been expecting you," the young widow said as she pushed some chairs together. "Valentir fell at the battle of the Morannon, Captain Erchirion told me."

Biljana settled on the chair that was offered and nodded. "It was the bravest who went to the Black Gate of Mordor."

Danica looked thoughtful. "I wish now that he had been less brave, I might have seen him again." She batted her eyes down. "And at the same time, it would have embarrassed me."

"It's not abnormal to have such conflicting feelings," said Lothiriel, who had also sat down in the meantime. "My friend fell into the same battle and I wish I had stopped him."

"Was that the boy with no voice?" asked Danica.

Lothiriel nodded. "We may not have been married, but I know how it feels to lose someone you love," she said, "and to wish you could have prevented his death."

Danica looked at the two women. "I heard that women fought in the pirate raid." She hesitated for a moment and then looked at Lothiriel. "Would you teach me, too? It shames me to hide in here and leave it to others to protect me," she said. "At least Valentir was able to prove his bravery before he fell."

Lothiriel and Biljana looked at each other for a moment. "I will soon begin training a group of women," Lothiriel said. "There is still room for you, if you wish."

Lothiriel and her father looked at the women. "Will everyone who agrees to the arrangements please raise his ... her hand," prince Imrahil said. Although more than a hundred women were present, Lothiriel counted only twenty hands.

"Although twenty is not really enough for a full company," she said, some of the women laughed, "I welcome you to the first women's company of the city guard of Dol Amroth. As agreed, the first practice session will take place tomorrow after noon." A moment later, the meeting was closed and the women disappeared chatting through the large doors.

Lothiriel sighed. "It won't be easy," she said. "I hadn't considered that most women also take care of their children and have household obligations. With four half-days a week, the training will be long."

"The advantage is," Imrahil said, "that of the twenty recruits, there are eighteen who already have quite a bit of experience with bow and arrow." Lothiriel nodded. Most of the members of her new company came from the archery club. There were only two women with no experience: Danica, the young widow, and Talar, the older of the two sisters Lothiriel had found on one of the pirate ships after the battle of Dol Amroth. The girls were still staying at the lemon plantation outside the city. Not only had they made themselves useful over the past two months, but they had also gained a place in the farming family that ran the plantation. Although Lothiriel had repeated her offer to accompany them home, the girls continued to delay their return.

"Have you decided yet whether to come with me to Rohan," her father asked. Lothiriel was startled out of her musings. She looked at her father, but could not utter a meaningful word. Her father smiled at her understandingly and patted her on the hand. "I'll hear when we leave," he said. He got up and left the room. Lothiriel was left alone, trapped by an inner struggle. With a groan, she walked out of the hall and ran across town to the stables where she saddled Lysippe. A moment later she galloped across the beach, looking for answers she could not give herself.

Although she had expected there to be much difference in their experience and physical skills, the women's practice sessions did not always go as Lothiriel hoped. After the first week, she was relieved that she only had to supervise them for four half-days. Yet she continued to encourage 'her women' to persevere, even when things were difficult.

"Use the thrust plate of your sword," Lothiriel said to Talar. It was the third time they were practicing with one-handed practice swords. Talar's hands were sore from the punches she was facing. Lothiriel showed what she meant, but after two nippy punches from Danica, Talar dropped her sword from her hands again. Danica seemed to have an innate talent for sword fighting and she did not spare her opponent.

"We'll try one more time," Lothiriel said. "Imagine Danica is a pirate." Talar needed no more motivation. Not only did she manage to parry Danica's attacks better now, with a loud scream she slammed her sword down with such force that Danica fell to her knees. Lothiriel was just able to stop Talar from finishing the fight with a final blow.

Talar threw her sword against the ground. "I'm sorry," she said. The women looked at each other in shock. "I'm sorry," Talar repeated as she dropped beside her opponent. Then Danica pulled her close and rocked her like a child. Talar cried with great shock.

Lothiriel was in her room changing clothes after training when Erchirion walked in on her.

"Can't you knock," she asked him as she quickly pulled her clean shirt over her shoulders. "I'm not a little girl anymore."

Silently, Erchirion dropped onto her bed. "Sometimes," he said, "I wish you were still that little girl, that affectionate but tiresome little rascal who chased me everywhere and asked a thousand questions." He traced with his finger the outline of Tihomir's portrait that was fastened to the wall with a nail beside her bed. "Then I would pat you on the buttocks and tell you that your stubbornness has lasted long enough now."

Lothiriel poked her head through the neckline of her dress and looked at him in surprise. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"About your quarrel with Éomer," he said as he watched her tighten the laces on the sides of her dress.

Lothiriel's hands fell silent, and as if frozen, she looked at her brother. "My 'quarrel' with Éomer, as you call it, has nothing to do with stubbornness," she finally said. With a sigh, she set herself beside Erchirion as she tried to stop the trembling of her lip with her hand. "It's more a matter of incompatible duties. He is king of Rohan and I am captain of the women's company of Dol Amroth."

"I would venture to say that one task does outweigh the other somewhat," Erchirion said. "You look at it in a typical men's way," Lothiriel said as she continued to tie her laces. "These women all lost something during the war. Their brother," from under her eyebrows she looked at Erchirion, "their father or their husband, and a few even much more than that." Her gaze grew intense. "They need me, Erchirion. By learning to defend themselves, they experience that they can take matters into their own hands." She stood up. "I wish Éomer all the good things of Middle-earth every day, but this is something I must do." She walked over to her shoes and bent down to put them on.

"You're going to miss his coronation," he said. "He's going to be disappointed." A loud sob escaped Lothiriel's throat and in a jiffy Erchirion was standing by her side. He lifted her chin and shook his head as he saw the tears streaming down her face. "My dear sister," he said and wrapped his arms tightly around her shoulders. "At least give him a gift, a keepsake, something he can hold on to."

It took a while for Lothiriel to know what gift she would give Éomer, but once she made up her mind she worked on it every spare moment.

"What are you doing alone in your room all these hours anyway?" asked Biljana as Lothiriel disappeared after dinner again.

"Embroidery," Lothiriel said.

Biljana looked at her suspiciously. "I don't believe any of it. You hate embroidery."

Still, Lothiriel spent weeks filling her evenings with embroidery, though she pricked her fingers so often that Mr. Silva, her harp teacher, complained about it.

"How can you play harp with such fingers," he moaned when he grabbed her hand during a lesson and felt the scabs on her fingertips. "Not hard that you keep playing off the beat."

Nevertheless, Lothiriel embroidered diligently because in a few weeks her father and Erchirion would already be leaving. Her mother had decided to travel with them as far as Minas Tirith where they would attend King Elessar's wedding. She would remain in the city while Imrahil and Erchirion traveled on with the rest of the caravan as far as Rohan.

Lothiriel would not go along. Despite King Éomer's invitation, she would not visit the beautiful caves of the Deep.

"You are missing a unique opportunity," her father said, as she communicated her decision. Lothiriel nodded. Prince Imrahil looked at his daughter frowning. "You are missing a wedding, a funeral AND a coronation." Again Lothiriel nodded. "I can't talk you out of it?" Lothiriel clamped her jaws together and shook her head. "I could oblige you," he said softly. Biljana, who was reading a book by the window, looked in their direction with shock. Imrahil pursed his lips. He looked from his wife's stern gaze to the agony in his daughter's eyes. "But that might not be such a good idea," he said. And with that, the subject was closed.

In addition to the wedding of King Elessar, there was a wedding celebration closer to home. Damirah and Captain Goran had been inseparable since the encampment in Itilien and, given their age, did not want to wait to cement their relationship. The ceremony was led by Prince Imrahil who took the opportunity to address the numerous attendees. "It is both the duty and pleasure of spouses to stand by each other and this both in good and bad days," he said.

"Lovers do not think in 'me' and 'you,' but in 'we'." Lothiriél clamped her jaws together and repressed her tears.

At the party, she behaved just like the others. She ate, drank, laughed, sang and danced. But as soon as she could, she climbed along the roofs and balconies to the roof of the bakery from where she had a view of the beach and the sea. It was the only shelter Lothiriél had not shared, even during the pirates' attack. It was the only shelter where she dared to shed her tears.

That evening, Biljana visited her. "Are you all right?" she asked.

It was a simple question, yet it took Lothiriél a while to answer. "You know the feeling when you look with adult eyes at the horse that looked huge as a child, and suddenly realize that it was actually just a pony?" she said. Biljana nodded. "I have the same thing with Dol Amroth," Lothiriél said. "I recognize it and it should feel familiar, yet it feels strange. As if things have been moved, taken away or added to make the picture suddenly look completely different."

"Could it be that, as with the pony, it is not the city that has changed, but the person looking at it?" said Biljana.

Dejected, Lothiriél looked at her. "I don't know," she said. "But it feels terrible."

At the request of the new couple, Damirah's duties had been passed on to Mirna, so Lothiriél now shared her chambermaid with her mother. And since her mother was leaving for Minas Tirith, Mirna went with her. Two weeks before the midsummer festival, they left with a group of five: the prince, his two youngest sons and his wife with her chambermaid. Lothiriél gave her gift along with Erchirion. She kept the parting brief and spent the rest of the day on the beach. There she sat most of the time watching her fellow townspeople swimming, paddling or just enjoying the sun.

In the weeks that followed, she increasingly sought her refuge on the roof of the bakery. Even during midsummer night she slipped away from the crowds in the square. She gazed at the water with the setting sun at her back and did not notice that the party noise in the square behind her fell silent, that it grew dark and the sky above her filled with stars. She only awoke from her stupor when she heard voices behind her, soft and whispering. When she turned around, she saw the white eyes of Lord Salvi. Without seeing anything, he peered through the hatch in his roof. They disappeared to make way for the head of Elphir's wife. Astonished, Lothiriél watched as Mirjana came crawling up the roof through the hatch. She lowered herself beside Lothiriél. "We've been looking for you for some time," Mirjana said. "Fortunately, Salvi knew where we could find you." Cautiously she bent down to look over the edge down. "How high up are we here?"

"I estimate about sixty meters," Lothiriél said. She pulled Mirjana back. "The view is prettier in that direction."

Mirjana looked in the direction Lothiriél pointed. "This is beautiful," she said. "You sure know how to choose your hiding place."

"It was 'our' place," Lothiriél said. "From Tihomir and me. For hours here we had imaginary adventures and fantasized that we were king and queen of a distant land."

She looked at Mirjana. "The irony is, when the opportunity to become queen was within my grasp, I no longer wished it." She sighed. "It didn't even matter whether it was Tihomir or Éomer who asked me. I already found the military responsibility father gave me terrible to bear."

Mirjana patted Lothiriel on the hand. "You were terribly young to already be carrying such responsibility." Lothiriel looked at her in surprise. "I asked Elphir to talk your father out of it when he gave you that order, but like the rest of your family, Elphir sticks to tradition," Mirjana said with a sigh. "You guys are so good at holding on; your lineage, your ancestors and heroes, your service to Dol Amroth, each other ... Don't get me wrong, you're a great family and you do great things, but sometimes it all feels very stifling."

"I'm not sure I fully understand what you mean," Lothiriel said.

"Where would you be now if your father had not asked you to start a women's company?"

Lothiriel hid her face behind her hands. "Indeed," Mirjana said.

"That doesn't mean I think my work is insignificant," Lothiriel said.

"Your work is not insignificant. But someone else could do it just as well as you," Mirjana said.

"You carry the burden of so many dead with you. Tihomir, your grandmother, your uncle and all the other war victims."

"Are you asking me to disobey my father?" asked Lothiriel.

"Not at all," Mirjana said. "I only ask you to allow yourself to unload the dead and choose life."

She stood up and held out her hand. Lothiriel hesitated. Then she grabbed Mirjana's hand and allowed herself to straighten.

"Éolif," cried Éomer, "Where is my cloak? Éolif came running and handed the cloak to his king. "Send Léofrith," said Éomer as he pulled his tunic over his head, "and ask Éowyn if the great hall ..."

"Calm down," Éowyn interrupted her brother as she entered his room. "Everything is ready. You're worrying about nothing."

Éomer looked at her with a fevered expression. "Perhaps we should adjust the room arrangement," he said, "Queen Arwen ..."

"... has other concerns than the snoring of a dwarf," she finished his sentence. Éowyn took both his hands. "Try to enjoy yourself," she said, "or at least relax, you don't get crowned every day. And our guests, no matter how highborn they are, are well taken care of." She looked at the wrinkle on his forehead and rubbed it smooth. "And don't look so sullen, for the first time in a long time there is peace in Rohan."

"There are only two women who think I look surly," he said, pushing her hand away. "One woman stands here with me and the other ..." He clamped his jaws together and was silent.

"I'm sure she had a good reason for not coming," Éowyn said. She helped him put on his cloak.

"May I congratulate you in advance," sounded a voice behind them. Éomer and Éowyn turned around. Standing in the doorway was an elegant woman with long, blond hair and bright blue eyes.

"Alfreda," Éomer said as he walked toward her. "How uncomfortable this must be for you."

Alfreda waved her hand as if swatting away a fly. "I can't grieve forever. Little in life goes as planned. Who would have expected that Théodred would die so young ... and that you would succeed his father." She wiped an imaginary speck of dust from Éomer's cloak. "Should you seek counsel or comfort, King Éomer, I am at your disposal." She turned and disappeared as quietly as she had come. Éowyn looked at her brother with wide eyes.

Only four days later, after most of the guests had left, was Éomer able to relax again. Tired after the hustle and bustle of the past few days, he dropped onto his bed. He actually had to call Éolif to help him take off his boots, but decided to take a nap beforehand. He laid his head on his pillow and closed his eyes, only to soon open them again. In the light of his candle, he looked at the pillow and saw that it was a linen bag on which his name was embroidered in colorful letters. Despite the limited light, he distinguished around his name several small tents and horses. In one of the corners were embroidered males sitting around a fire and in another corner were males swimming in a river. He held the bag even closer to the light and also discovered a bottle labeled 'pergria' and a bag labeled 'bhanga herb'. Now that he looked closer, he saw that one of the horses was standing in the water and was being held by a female figure with long, black hair. Beside her stood another male, blond and tall. Moved, he pulled the sack against his chest. A piece of cloth fell out. That too was held up to the candlelight. It was a shirt, the edges of which were as richly embroidered as the bag it was wrapped in. Impatiently, he took off his clothes and then put on the shirt. Smiling, with the bag clutched against him, he fell asleep.

Summer was drawing to a close, the days were getting shorter and the air more humid. New ships were being built in a workshop behind the harbor as the city's fleet expanded. The women of Lothiriel's company had mastered the basic skills of swordsmanship and were now practicing archery and horseback riding. At the plantation where Talar and her sister Fiera were staying, the last of the lemons had been harvested, and the two girls had indicated that they were ready to return to their own village. Although it was not entirely clear to Lothiriel exactly which village they were from, their explanation indicated that it was on the Gaeruilfalas, the seaweed beaches. According to Elphir, it could not be more than a three day's journey east of Dol Amroth.

With his permission, Lothiriel took a few days off to fulfill her promise to the girls and accompany them home. Danica would also accompany them. She had become Lothiriel's right hand in the past few months and stood head and shoulders above the others in terms of swordsmanship.

"Be careful," Mirjana said, when they were finally ready to leave. She stuffed Lothiriel with another bag of mouth supplies. "And take good care of each other."

With Lothiriel in front and Danica last, they rode in a line along the coastal path, which for the first few miles was nastily close to the meter-high cliffs before turning off and winding more inland. At the end of their first day, they made camp at the foot of a small hill covered with ancient pines. The drought and strong winds made it too dangerous to build a fire, so after dinner the women rolled themselves into their blankets and slept close together to protect themselves from the falling night temperatures. They took turns keeping watch, but except for a curious fox, they saw no living animal or human all night. The next day, too, they followed the coastal path. The high cliffs now gave way to dunes, and the path snaked between sand hills and prickly scrub. By evening, the path seemed to end and they rode along the beach into the sunset. As soon as the sun was completely down, they stopped and at the edge of the

dunes where they dug a pit which they filled with dry wood from the pine forest that was behind the dunes. That night they made a fire over which they roasted their, by now hardened, bread while singing songs and telling stories.

Although the sea air and the rhythmic sound of the waves soon lulled Lothiriel to sleep, her sleep was not peaceful. She dreamed that someone was calling her, that she was walking toward the voice in the darkness, but barely making progress because of the obstacles that kept being placed in her path. Suddenly a shadow fell over her and instinctively she grabbed her knife. In the dim glow of the moon she saw a man bending over her. She pressed her knife against his belly and he flinched. As she stood up, she drew her sword, ready for the attack. Across the fire, Talar pushed another man to the ground, her knife resting against his throat. "Who are you and what do you want from us?" shouted Lothiriel to their attackers.

"We are here by order of Lord Dimitar," said the man closest to her. "He sends us out to keep the roads free of wandering rogues."

"Do we look like wandering rogues?" said Danica who, like Lothiriel, had now drawn her sword.

"No, though we wondered what you had to hide. It's not common for girls to wander around alone," he said. "Nor is it common for girls to swing swords." He looked at them as if he doubted their striking power.

"What authority does this Lord Dimitar have, that he controls innocent citizens of Dor-en-ernil?" said Lothiriel as she pressed the point of her sword dangerously close to his abdomen. The man stepped back. "Lord Dimitar is chief of the villages along Hallfalas. And he acts only according to the authority given to him by his fellow villagers."

"Hallfalas?" called out Fiera who stood unarmed out of the way. "Are we near the shadow beach?" Talar too now looked at the man with wide eyes. "Then we are not far from the the seaweed beaches."

"Is that where you guys are going?" the man asked. The women nodded. "Other than seaweed, you won't find much there," he said. "The villages on the seaweed beaches have been looted and burned down. The next inhabited village is Halldoron."

Lothiriel lowered her sword. "Take us to Lord Dimitar," she said.

Now that it was clear that the men had no bad intentions and that the girls' village had been wiped off the map, they took their time gathering their conveniences. The men rode ahead of them to Halldoron, a fishing village built around an old oak tree. Blue and white fishing boats bobbed in a natural harbor. A defensive wall was being built between the harbor and the village. Although the sun was already high when they entered the village, both the village and the harbor were in the shadow of Tolfalas, the barren island that hid the Anduin estuary from view. Lothiriel suddenly realized that she had sailed past here twice in recent months and had not noticed the village either time.

Lord Dimitar turned out to be an old man who lived with his daughter and her brooding family. "We have taken in wandering women before," he said. "But never before have I seen a group as well-armed as you."

"We are not wandering," said Lothiriel. "We come from Dol Amroth and are looking for the village of these girls. We found them on the pirates' ships, but they are from a village on the seaweed beaches."

"The pirates completely looted the villages along the Gaeruilfalas," Lord Dimitar said. "Only the oldest and the youngest remained behind. We took in as many refugees as we could. Some came soon, others only last months, after the war ended. And some are still wandering around, too afraid to return."

He called one of the children to him. "Send a message through the village that we have two newcomers."

Not much later, the house flooded with villagers hoping to recognize missing relatives in the new arrivals. And so Talar and Fiera were finally reunited with their grandmother and brother. Lord Dimitar looked at Lothiriel with twinkling eyes. "Tell your father that we have it under control, though he may always send help to rebuild the defensive wall."

Lothiriel looked at him suspiciously. "How do you know who my father is?"

Dimitar laughed. "You did try very hard not to tell who you were," he said. "And there are few women who have both the guts and the leave of their lord to roam the country without a male escort. I think Lady Lothiriel, savior of Dol Amroth, is one of them."

Lothiriel shook her head laughing. "I will pass on the message to my father," she said.

"You will always be welcome in Dol Amroth," she told Talar the next morning. "And don't forget to practice. Perhaps a day will come when you can save yourself and others from the hands of the enemy."

"I will practice," Talar said. "And I will teach anyone who wants it to handle a sword." She hugged her two friends and disappeared behind the wall.

Both Danica and Lothiriel drove back home, lost in thought. Again they slept in the dunes, though they decided it was safer not to make a fire. The night was clear with a crescent moon and numerous stars, and Lothiriel gazed at their reflection on the rippling sea.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Danica as she positioned herself next to Lothiriel.

"I try not to think about anything," Lothiriel said. "The night is too beautiful for sad thoughts."

"Are you still grieving for your friend?" said Danica.

Lothiriel shrugged, "I had known Tihomir for so long that he became a part of me. A part that will always stay with me." She smiled. "He made me a better person," she said. "Without him, I would probably be worrying right now about possible dangers on the road. But Tihomir was tranquility itself; he taught me to let go of my fears and enjoy a night like this. It makes me sad and also grateful." She looked at Danica. "And you, do you still grieve for your husband?" Danica nodded. "He was apprenticed to my father. That's how we got to know each other." She picked at her lip. "He would succeed my father, we would have children and live happily ever after." She wiped the tears from her eyes. "His death not only meant the end of his life, it also meant the end of my dream. And now I have to invent a whole new life, without him."

Lothiriel put her arm around Danica's shoulder. "The hardest thing, I find, is not to feel guilty when you decide to move on," she said.

Lothiriel's homecoming coincided with that of her parents and her brothers. For weeks after supper they told stories about their king's marriage to Queen Arwen, an elf from Rivendell. Erchirion was full of words about Rohan, and about a Lady Vera he had met at Éomer's coronation feast. And although Lothiriel was happy for him and eager for their experiences, she now regretted her decision not to go with them. After a time, she no longer found the courage to listen to their stories, and she increasingly retreated to her room where she filled her evenings playing her harp and writing down the stories she had heard in Itilien.

On her twentieth birthday, her father called her to him. "You have made much progress during my absence," he said. "It may be a small group, but your women are as deadly with their swords as any city guard."

"It is indeed unfortunate that there are so few of them," Lothiriel said. "I realize now that my expectations were too high. It takes, I fear, more than a sword to make women aware of their own resilience."

Imrahil looked at her thoughtfully. Then he smiled. "But there is good news," he said as he pulled out a letter. "King Elessar has also gathered a group of women who want to learn swordsmanship. And Queen Arwen asks that you keep her company for the next few months." King Elessar and Queen Arwen's invitation to spend the winter in Minas Tirith came like a fresh breeze on a hot summer day. Before she left, her father sent twenty men to Halldoron to help Lord Dimitar rebuild the defensive wall. Danica promised to hold weekly practice sessions with the other women of their company during her absence. Lord Salvi gave her a practice harp to take with her, and her mother spoiled her with a new winter dress and an extra warm cloak. Six months after her hasty retreat, Lothiriel again set foot in the port of Minas Tirith.

King Elessar and Queen Arwen gave her a warm welcome, and Lothiriel soon felt at ease. She was given a spacious bedroom in the citadel's private quarters, which contained not only a bed but also a table and a comfortable sofa. She was given free access to the library, which held a wealth of information. Twice a week she taught swordsmanship to about a dozen women. It was a motivated group that made rapid progress despite the narrowing comments of some men. King Elessar responded with satisfaction when he attended a practice session after several weeks.

But her most cherished hours were spent by Lothiriel in the company of Queen Arwen, who was not only beautiful, but also the sweetest creature she had ever met. Those hours they filled with walking, reading, playing the harp and embroidery, for since her gift to Éomer, Lothiriel had taken a liking to the task that had previously seemed so dull and banal to her.

"I'm sorry," Lothiriel said when she was once again off the beat when playing the harp one afternoon. "I am, I'm afraid, not as numerate as you."

Queen Arwen laughed. "Is it talent or experience you lack? You cannot forget that I have been practicing for over two thousand years."

Lothiriel drew big eyes and laughed along. "I really can't compete with that," she said.

"I'm glad we can make music together," the queen said. "There are very few musicians in the city."

Lothiriel looked at her uneasily. "I almost dare not ask," she said, "but you must miss Rivendell and your family very much."

Queen Arwen looked at her thoughtfully. In her eyes Lothiriel saw sadness, but around her mouth played a smile. "It is not easy for any woman to leave behind her family and safe haven," she said. "But your husband's love makes up for a lot."

Lothiriel sighed. "Unfortunately for you, you found only one musician in his company, and one with little talent and even less experience. My teacher is right, I'm afraid. I will never be a good musician, just as I will never be a good helmsman."

"A helmsman," the queen said in surprise. She laughed. "The women of Dol Amroth do get a very special education."

Lothiriel shrugged her shoulders. "Considering we live by the sea, my father thinks it's important that all his children can sail," she said. "Though I advise you never to put me behind the wheel, because I'm just wandering around." She looked thoughtful. "Just like in life, actually."

Queen Arwen took Lothiriel by the hand. "I think you know very well where you want to go, but maybe you don't know how to get there."

After some weeks, she was also invited to the king's private quarters in the evenings, where, at the king's request, she made reports of his travels. The evenings she spent alone, she continued to work on the texts and her awe of King Elessar grew by the day, for he had made many and distant journeys and had often been present at times when the history of Middle-earth had taken a turn. From time to time King Elessar would ask about the travel journals that had been finished. He read through them, made a change or addition here and there, and stored them in a leather folder.

"How is it," Lothiriel asked one evening, "that you led an attack on Umbar more than forty years ago and yet look younger than my father?"

The king smiled. "I have been blessed by my lineage with an extra-long life," he said. Then he looked at his queen reading a book by the fireplace, and his gaze took on something sad. "But sometimes even an extra-long life does not provide enough time to spend with your beloved." It was around midwinter, when the days were at their shortest and the nights at their longest, that he told her about his first visit to Rohan. Decades before Lothiriel's birth, he had fought at the side of King Thingel, Éomer's grandfather. King Elessar told of the customs, songs and language of the Rohirrim with great affection. And Lothiriel listened eagerly. In the evenings when she wrote down his tales, she yearned to gallop across the green steppes, travel with the nomadic shepherd people and visit the golden hall of Edoras. And every night she wished Éomer all the happiness he could find and at the same time felt unreasonably jealous of the woman he would make his own.

Lothiriel dove deeper into her cloak and tucked her hands under her armpits. With her eyes closed and her back against the city wall, she enjoyed the warmth of the last rays of the sun disappearing red behind the White Mountains. The cold had driven people indoors and the city streets were quiet. Behind her, she heard a rhythmic sound that gradually grew louder. Curious, she turned and saw a herd of horses galloping across the fields of the Pelennor. Quickly she ran to the lower parts of the city, up to the city gate, to find Erchirion there. She

looked at him, smiled and threw herself into his arms. "What a surprise to see you here," she said.

Erchirion set her on the ground and held her at an arm's length away from him. "You don't look bad," he said. "Minas Tirith is obviously doing you good."

Lothiriel stuck her tongue out at him, but the joy of seeing him again soon made her smile again. "You don't look bad yourself," she said, "though you smell like a horse."

Erchirion chuckled. "Then again, I have been living with these beautiful ladies for a week."

Lothiriel looked at him questioningly. "These mares are on their way to Rohan," he said. "As part of an agreement between father, King Elessar and Éomer. I have brought Lysippe with me, by the way."

"Why?" asked Lothiriel alarmed.

"Don't worry," Erchirion said. "She's part of a little plan of mine." Lothiriel looked even more worried.

Three days after Erchirion's arrival, Faramir also came to the city. He had overseen the work in Itilien all winter, of which he had been made prince after King Elessar's coronation. Now that his marriage to Lady Éowyn was approaching, work on a settlement where the young couple could live with their court was proceeding apace.

That evening they all sat together and King Elessar asked Faramir about his further plans.

"The construction work requires my attention," Faramir said with a sigh, "and at the same time it is also my desire to discuss some pressing matters with Éowyn." He turned to Erchirion.

"Could I ride with you to Rohan?"

"My path does not lead to Edoras, but to the shepherd people in East Emnet," Erchirion said.

"But I invite you to accompany me and my ladies as far as it suits your plans."

"Speaking of ladies," Faramir said, "I heard that I am not the only family member to fall for the charm of a woman from Rohan."

Erchirion colored red. "In my case, unfortunately, there are some obstacles," he said. "The father of the lady in question has his reservations."

"Based on what," King Elessar asked.

"On the grounds that my cradle was not in Rohan," Erchirion said. "In that regard, I would have liked my sister to travel with me so that the man understands that I can be trusted."

King Elessar smiled. "I was already wondering," he looked at Lothiriel, "if you might care to see the green plains of Rohan with your own eyes."

Lothiriel drew big eyes, stood up and sat back down. "I would very much like to behold the green plains of Rohan," she finally said. "At least, if you give me leave to do so."

King Elessar exchanged glances with his queen, who sat aloof and did not participate in the conversation, although Lothiriel knew she was listening very intently.

"I'm happy to give you leave," he said. "You have helped me tremendously, but I realize now that there is enough work to go on for years to come. I dare no longer take advantage of your time and talent, for I believe it is not only Faramir and Erchirion who have matters to discuss in Rohan." As frozen, Lothiriel looked at him. "On that subject, I would like to recommend that you travel on to Edoras," he said to Erchirion. "A good word from King Éomer will win over your future father-in-law, and I think Lothiriel still has something to talk about with my friend."

Lothiriel colored red and quickly turned her gaze to the ground.

VIII. The long road to Edoras

Lothiriel looked at the snow-capped peaks of the mountains. It was only the fourth day of their journey, and her buttocks were raw and burning from the many hours she spent on her horse. Not only did her buttocks ache, but her back was stiff from sleeping on frozen ground. She also now understood why Erchirion had smelled so strongly of horses upon his arrival in Minas Tirith. One hundred and twenty mares they drove to East Emnet, over a distance of several hundred miles. One hundred and twenty mares they had to herd, guard and provide food and water for day and night. The latter proved especially challenging now that temperatures were at their lowest and even fast-flowing streams were freezing shut. "Who actually came up with this impossible plan?" she asked when they finally stopped for the night.

"Éomer," Erchirion and Faramir replied simultaneously.

Lothiriel groaned. "I'll do something to him, should I see him again," she said. "I thought only Erchirion could think of something so nonsensical."

"Frankly, I may have given him the idea," Erchirion said as he pulled an axe from his saddlebag to break the ice of the small lake next to which they were making camp.

"And maybe I encouraged him to transfer the mares so early in the year," Faramir said. "That way their foals will have longer grazing time next year."

"That was a silly idea for a wise man like you," she said gruffly. Faramir looked at her with a mixture of pride and regret. Lothiriel swiveled her eyes. "Wouldn't it have been easier to bring some stallions to Gondor?"

"Men also like it sometimes when women come to them instead of the other way around," Erchirion said. Lothiriel's eyes lightened. "They really do," he said, more seriously than she was used to from him.

When Faramir also nodded, she clenched her teeth, turned to Lysippe and loosened her blankets.

A week and many miles later, the Great West Road crossed the Mering River. They took their time driving the horses across the bridge and set up camp on the west bank of the river. They had been riding in the shelter of the Ferien Forest for several days, and they hesitated to leave it. One more day's journey beyond the forest lay the plains of Rohan where the wind and cold were once again at large. That evening they discussed the route each would take. Faramir had already delayed considerably by traveling with them. He would follow the Great Road to the Fold and then turn off to Edoras. His two bodyguards had been doing good driving work, and would be missed. Erchirion, Lothiriel and the remaining drivers would travel north across the plains, crossing the Entwas River and heading into East Emnet in search of a certain Holdwine to whose care they would entrust their mares.

That evening, under her blankets, Lothiriel reflected on the road ahead, and she suddenly realized that by crossing the Mering River, she had finally arrived in Rohan.

Two days later, they left the forest behind and Lothiriel galloped down the Great West Road along the green plains of Rohan. Although it was still freezing, the sun was shining. And the snow on the White Mountains reflected the light in such a way that it seemed the sun sparkled and shone more along this side of the mountains than along the side of Gondor. Astonished, Lothiriel looked at the fresh green that stretched as far as the eye could see and at the ears of grass that rippled as if they were the rippling waves of the sea. She thought of the words with which King Elessar had described the steppe of Rohan and felt that no matter how well he had phrased it, they had fallen short of the truth. Raising her arms in the air, she gave Lysippe the freedom to walk as she wished. Faramir and the drivers laughed, but Erchirion wept, for he had not seen his sister so joyful in a long time.

The roofs in Edoras had snow so thick that they reflected the moonlight. Smoke billowed from the chimneys and the horses in the stables breathed clouds.

In Meduseld, the great golden hall, two figures sat by the fire. "A woman cannot wait forever for a man," Alfreda said as she took Éomer's hand. "Soon Éowyn will leave and you know as well as I do that you need a strong woman to stand behind you." She kissed the palm of his hand. "I am available and more than willing to take on that task."

Éomer looked at her thoughtfully. It was not the first time Alfreda had informed him directly of her ambitions. She was a beautiful woman, of good family, elegant and wise. He sighed. "The loss of my cousin grieves me as much as it does you," he said. "As tempting as it sounds, it would be unbecoming to decide such matters so soon after his death. Entering into a marriage is not something one rushes into."

Alfreda squeezed her eyes to slits and pulled her hand away. "Sooner or later you will have to make a decision, Éomer." She stood up and strode out of the room.

"And who would ever have thought that you would be engaged to a prince," she said to Éowyn on her way out. "Though, I heard, you had your sights set on the King of Gondor."

Éowyn who had just entered looked at her brother in surprise. "What poison did she drink?"

Éomer shrugged. "She feels rejected, a feeling with which I am not unfamiliar myself," he said.

"She makes no secret of the fact that she has set her sights on you," Éowyn said.

"Something many a man envies me for," her brother said. "She's definitely not a bad lot."

Surprised, Éowyn looked at her brother. "You're not seriously considering taking her as your wife, are you? There are more fish in the sea. And most of them are nicer than she is."

"She's right though, Éowyn," he said. "Even after you leave, this house is in need of a woman's touch." He put his hands over his face. "And I long for a woman."

There was so much desperation in his voice that Éowyn moved next to him and put her hand on his.

"You know as well as I do that Alfreda does not sincerely love you," she said. "Her only wish is to be queen." She squeezed his hand. "She is not the woman you desire."

"The woman you speak of is not here," he said, jumping up in frustration. "And it is her wish not to be queen."

"Lothiriel is still young," Éowyn said. "She is still searching for the role she has to play. You must give her time, Éomer. Impatience is a poor counsellor." She squeezed her eyes to slits.

“Remember that for Alfreda it is only a small step from one cousin to another. How many steps does Lothiriel have to take, do you think? And how much heartache must she overcome with each step that she moves further away from her family?” Éowyn now stood up as well. “I invite her to the wedding,” she said. “She is, after all, a cousin of Faramir. Wait to make a decision until you have spoken to her.”

“Do whatever you can't resist,” Éomer said. “I leave for the gap tomorrow and don't expect to return until next month.”

It had been five days now since they had left Faramir and his men behind, and two days since they had crossed the Entwas River. Since then they had been riding northeast, toward the Emyrn Muil in search of Holdwine, the head of the herdsman's family who would care for the mares for the next two seasons. Lothiriel was dozing on her horse when one of the drivers suddenly called out. In the distance, small figures came riding in their direction. They were still far away, but were approaching with great speed. With one hundred and twenty horses in front of them they drove towards them. A moment later they were warmly greeted by Holdwine and his horsemen. One of them looked very familiar to Lothiriel.

"Lady Lothiriel," Folca said, laughing, "what a surprise."

"A fine surprise," Lothiriel said. "Now I'm sure our ladies are in good hands."

The shepherds' tent camp consisted of about ten octagonal tents placed together in a circle. In the center of the circle was a fire pit where some women prepared food, surrounded by their children and goats. Erchirion and the drivers were assigned their own tent, but Lothiriel's presence seemed to fill Holdwine with surprise and awe. "I had not counted on the presence of a Lady," he said. "I hope you will be content to sleep with one of our families." He combed his hands through his straw-blond hair.

"I am happy with any sleeping place you have for me," Lothiriel said. "Anything is better than the frozen ground I've been sleeping on for the past three weeks."

"That's settled then," Folca said, "Lady Lothiriel is staying with us." He opened the flap of a yellow tent decorated with a pattern of green interwoven lines. A fire burned in the middle of the tent, and on the bed sat a young woman who had just breastfed a baby. Lothiriel wanted to turn around to give the woman some privacy, but the young mother beckoned her and invited her to take a seat next to her. "This is Widwine, my wife," Folca said as Lothiriel settled down, "and our youngest daughter Wendela. Velta, the eldest, is outside with her grandmother."

Surprised, Lothiriel looked at them. "Forgive me," she said, "but you seem so young to already have a family with two children."

Folca laughed and translated her comment for his wife who then laughed as well. "Widwine and I married young," he said and shrugged. "It just felt right." Widwine handed her baby to Lothiriel who accepted it awkwardly. And while Widwine rearranged her clothes and Folca threw another block of wood on the fire, Wendela wet Lothiriel.

Lothiriel washed herself and her dress in the company of an unknown woman, a baby and a three-year-old girl who stared at her curiously the whole time. When she set herself by the

fire to dry her hair, Velta crawled onto her lap where she fell asleep after a while. The warmth of the fire and the child's body also made Lothiriel sleepy and she was awakened only hours later by Widwine inviting her to a meal.

After the meal, she, Erchirion, Holdwine and Folca inspected the herd. The shepherds had a smaller herd of their own in which several foals were already roaming. They were well-built horses, strong and large. From a distance they stood judging the newcomers. "It will take a while for them to get used to each other," Holdwine said.

Suddenly Lothiriel noticed a black mare with three white socks and a narrow blaze. "That mare looks suspiciously familiar," Lothiriel said. She looked at Folca questioningly.

"That's Svarti," he said, "the mare you cared for. Not only is she fully recovered, but she brought back a memento from Itilien." He smiled. "She's heavily pregnant."

That night Lothiriel awoke to a soft sound beside her makeshift bed. In the light of the extinguishing fire, she saw Velta crouched beside her. The girl looked at her with wide eyes, and moved, Lothiriel flipped back her blankets. Velta nestled against her and pressed her nose into Lothiriel's hair. In the days and nights that followed, the girl did not leave Lothiriel's side. As with Tihomir, they spontaneously developed a common sign language. Even when Folca enlisted her help in Svarti's delivery, Velta drifted after her. Svarti gave birth to a sturdy stallion foal.

"What name shall we give it?" asked Holdwine after examining mare and foal.

"Let's call it 'Estel'," Lothiriel said, "because hope is what I feel in my heart."

After three weeks of wandering around, Lothiriel felt good to be part of this small family community for a while. She helped the women gathering wood, cooking and taking care of the children. While working, the women taught her their own language of Rohan. At their farewell, a week later, Lothiriel gave Velta a doll in the shape of a horse. She had cut the fabric from a corner of her blanket and stuffed it with straw. 'Goodbye,' she said in the language of Rohan. 'I will not soon forget you.'

She turned around one more time, then continued her way toward the Entwas.

"Brother, it's time we got involved in your love life," Lothiriel said as they camped that evening in the shelter of a hill. "Tell me how you met Vera, because I seem to have missed that part of your travel story."

"Vera is a niece of Lord Elfhelm," Erchirion said. "You know, Éomer's Marshal of the Eastern Mark." Lothiriel nodded. "She attended King Théoden's funeral and Éomer's coronation," Erchirion said. "Both her husband and her brother were killed in the battle on the fields of the Pelennor."

"Her husband?" said Lothiriel, "So she's already been married?"

"Less than a year," he said nodding his head, "after his death she moved back in with her father."

"And after the coronation you had a chat with her?" said Lothiriel.

Erchirion pursed his lips. "Let's just say that at the party after the coronation, I was involved with Merry and Pippin in an accident that made Vera suddenly ... wet."

Lothiriel laughed. "Why doesn't that surprise me? How did it turn out?"

"Under her supervision, the three of us did the dishes." He scratched his hair. "And cleaned the hall."

Lothiriel laughed even harder. "Clearly a woman who knows how to control you," she said.

He nodded appreciatively. "It was the beginning of a remarkable friendship," he said.

"But her father was not so happy about the situation," she said.

Erchirion shook his head. "No," he said, "he is not happy. Since the death of his son, he has watched over his children like a wolf over his pack. To his mind, Dol Amroth lies on the other side of Middle-earth."

"It may not be on the other side of Middle-earth, but it is on the other side of the White Mountains," Lothiriel sighed as she stretched her back. "And admit it. It's not close either because we've been on the road a long time." She yawned, turned and tried to catch sleep despite the cold ground.

Three days after their farewell to the horse herders, they crossed the Entwas River again. From there, the drivers rode east back to Minas Tirith while Lothiriel and Erchirion rode west. As they approached the Great West Road, the swaying green plains increasingly gave way to small groves of yews and oaks, while numerous streams made their way to the Entwas. Although they found hardly any people, the bridges, paths and stone-stacked walls proved that the area was indeed inhabited. Here and there plumes of smoke betrayed the presence of houses, though they were hidden among the trees or built in the shelter of the hills. They spent the second night after crossing the Entwas at the home of a young farming family. The farm was in the shade of some willows, next to a slow-flowing stream.

The house consisted of a large room where people cooked, ate and slept around a central fire. It had no windows, only an opening in the roof through which smoke from the fire could escape. Behind a wooden screen were a handful of cows and goats. At breakfast, it appeared that the farmer and farmer's wife mistook them for a young couple who had strayed, and after providing them with fresh bread and cheese, they pointed out to Lothiriel and Erchirion the shortest route to the main road that ran straight through Rohan.

Barely a day later, they reached the Great West Road. And although they were only a day's journey from Vera, they both longed for a nutritious meal and a warm, comfortable bed. Both themselves and their clothes could use a wash, and the hooves of their horses needed urgent care. They decided to give themselves a day's rest and spend the night at a roadside inn.

Éomer stared into the fire. The meeting with his two marshals had reassured him, and he now sat in the living quarters of the Hornburg, enjoying their company and a mug of ale. He thought of the battle on the fields of the Pelennor, almost a year ago, and of the affairs that had followed.

"What about your friend Erchirion," Elfhelm asked after a while. "Is he continuing with your plan to drive the mares from Gondor to Rohan?"

Éomer laughed. "I think so, yes. Though it's an insane plan. It would be much easier to take some of our stallions to Gondor." He shook his head. "I fear the plan was the result of an excess of ale and unrequited love. By the way, do you have any news of your niece Vera?"

Elfhelm shook his head. "As far as I know, your friend hasn't been heard from since. My brother is unrepentant about it. Although we both know that Erchirion is a good match, Ulfur is right. Between Dol Amroth and the Fold lies a gigantic mountain range and a world of difference."

Éomer frowned. "Despite the distance, to my knowledge the people of Gondor are not so different from those of Rohan," he said. "Since my sister plans to invite Imrahil and his family to the wedding, Vera and Erchirion will meet again next summer." He rubbed his chin. "It would be nice should there be more than one marriage between Rohan and Gondor. And as you say yourself, Erchirion is a good match, he is a little impetuous perhaps, but a fine fellow." He took a sip of ale. "Perhaps I can persuade your brother to consent to their marriage?"

Elfhelm shrugged. "You can try," he said. "Ulfur will eventually bow to his king's wishes."

"It is not about my wish, but that of two lovers," Éomer said. He bit his lip and looked questioningly at his two marshals. "By the way, with your permission, I would like to have a ring made with a stone from the Deep," he said. Seeing their questioning looks, he hesitated. "A wedding ring," he finally said.

"It's about time," Erkenbrand said, patting his king on the shoulder, smiling. "A good wife brings peace and tranquility to your home." He made a toasting gesture and the three men drank to Éomer's health. "So Alfreda was right," Erkenbrand said, "when she said it was only a matter of time before you would give in."

"Alfreda?" said Elfhelm. "I've put my money on Holdwena." Éomer choked and spluttered his beer into the fire.

'The Old Bridge Inn' was a busy inn. It had a central common-room that was extended U-shaped along both sides with a row of guest rooms connected by a covered gallery. Lothiriel and Erchirion were fortunate to find a room with two beds and a fireplace. At their request, a washtub was brought and both brother and sister enjoyed the comfort of a hot bath. Erchirion had a shave and his curls were cut. Lothiriel had her dresses washed and enjoyed the luxury of her nightshirt for the first time in a long time. As she let her hair dry by the fireplace, she stroked the embroidery on her sleeve in thought. Now that she had returned to civilization, it was time for her to face her greatest fear. She remembered very well the last words she had spoken to Éomer during their argument and feared now more than ever that he had become engaged or perhaps even married by now. And although she hoped that in that case he had struck a woman who loved him, she knew that her heart would break when she saw them together.

Meanwhile, Erchirion had taken the horses to the ferrier next to the inn. The horses' hooves were cleaned and the irons checked. The horses were returned to the stable and Erchirion sat down with a large glass of ale beside the fireplace in the inn's common-room. He thought back to the battle of the fields of the Pelennor, now a year and a day ago. He drank to his fallen friends and in his mind thanked his king who had ensured that the threat of Sauron was gone forever. The warmth of the fire and the pleasure of the ale made him sleepy and slowly he dozed off.

When he opened his eyes he noticed that he was still in the inn's common-room, but unlike before, it was now packed. Not only men, but entire families were drinking and eating in the dim light of the candles that had been lit during his nap. He was just about to get up and return to his room when he caught snippets of conversation at the table near him and realized they were talking about his friend Éomer.

"...wondering if he will be there this year too. Before he became king he came to the market every year, but he must be too busy now," said one woman. "However, it would be a nice gesture to the people."

"He is not bad at heart," said another woman. "But I hope he also has a wise heart, for rumor has it that he is considering marriage to his late cousin's fiancée." Erchirion turned pale and pricked up his ears. "And we all know that then it is not the king who will rule, but his wife," the woman continued her story.

The other woman laughed, "Just like her mother, Lady Alfreda knows how to use her charms to get her will through."

Erchirion remained seated as if paralyzed. It was only gossip, he thought, but where there was smoke, there was usually fire. With legs of lead, a moment later he stepped into the room he shared with his sister.

Lothiriel watched Erchirion ride a long way ahead of her and exhorted Lysippe to speed up. She wanted to enjoy the scenery instead of flying through it as if they were being chased by an army of orcs. The terrain they rode through was sometimes open and sometimes overgrown with a thick forest before changing back to fields and meadows. This region was more densely populated than any part of Rohan they had traversed. Since their departure this morning, they had already passed several villages, and in the hills at the foot of the White Mountains, she saw even more villages. The White Mountains themselves disappeared in a veil of clouds, as if they had something to hide. Only toward evening did Erchirion agree to slow down and they went in search of a place to spend the night.

"Why are you suddenly in such a hurry?" she asked her brother as they enjoyed an evening meal in the small, private parlor of an inn.

Erchirion looked at her agonized. "I fear the longer, the more we are too late," he said. "What if Vera got to know someone else in the meantime, someone more suitable, according to her father?"

"Then the love she felt for you must not have been very deep," Lothiriel said. "In that case, she may be doing you a favor by relieving you of the torment of love." She laughed at her own dramatic words, but Erchirion did not laugh along. She grabbed her brother's hand. "Is there any point in worrying about something beyond your control for the time being?" she said. "The worst that can happen is that she breaks your heart. And in that case there's nothing left but to pick up the shards together and fill the rest of your days in the most useful way."

"Is that what you would do if it turns out that Éomer has someone else in the meantime?" said Erchirion with an intensity that surprised her.

"That's what I tell myself I would do," she said, blinking back the tears that suddenly welled up.

"I think we understand each other," Erchirion said.

"Éolif," cried Éomer, "where is my ..."

"Here," said Éolif who came running with the king's cloak, "I was just about to hang it out to dry."

King Éomer looked at his second cousin frowning. After hours of driving through the snow, he had removed his wet clothes and now, by the light of a candle, he was digging among the blankets on his bed. "I'm looking for my shirt, the one with all the embroidery."

Éolif turned pale. "I took the liberty of asking Léofrith to wash it, my lord."

"Send Léofrith," said Éomer. "And ask her to make fire. It's freezing cold in my room." Sighing, he lowered himself onto his bed. He felt rushed. But it was not because of Elfhelm and Erkenbrand or because of the farmers of the Gap, for they had reassured him that there was plenty of sowing and planting. Nor was it that Éowyn worried him. On the contrary, she oversaw not only the day-to-day affairs of Edoras, but also the preparations for her marriage to Faramir. He rubbed his face. What was keeping Léofrith?

A moment later, Éolif came into the room. He was carrying a bowl of soup. "Léofrith is not here," he said. "She left for Aldburg this afternoon, to help her sister give birth." He set the bowl of soup on the table. "The shirt, unfortunately, I cannot find."

Éomer closed his eyes sighing. "Light the fire," he said.

Lothriel and Erchirion set out early the next morning. Following the innkeeper's directions, they followed the Great Road another ten miles west and then turned onto a path that snaked through the hills. Beside the path flowed a stream that after a few miles flowed into a lake. Lost in thought, they followed the path that ran along the eastern bank, under the shade of old oaks and chestnut trees. Suddenly Lothriel saw among the reeds across the lake a large, white bird and she stopped. Erchirion, too, stopped. Neither of them had ever seen such a bird except in one of the books in their father's library.

"A white heron," Erchirion whispered.

Lothriel nodded. "Be patient and follow your heart," she said. "That's what Nestriel wrote about it, five hundred years ago." The heron stood silently staring at the water. Suddenly his long beak shot into the water, only to surface with a fish that disappeared down his throat in one swift motion. Brother and sister looked at each other smiling.

"Let's hope Nestriel is right," said Erchirion. "That all we need is patience, and a strong and stout heart." At that moment the bird took off and flew sheering over the trees under which Lothriel and Erchirion were hiding.

They left the lake behind and followed the path further and further up among the hills. Here, in the foothills of the mountains, the fog lingered longer and it was colder than on the Great Road.

They drove past some farms and followed the path to where it stopped, at a high fence with a wide wooden gate. Carved into a large horizontal beam connecting the two support beams along either side of the gate were two large wolf heads. Their heads were turned toward each other and their tongues swung toward each other making it seem as if they shared only one long tongue together. Beyond the gate was Ulvâker, the village where Vera lived.

Erchirion caught Lothiriel's gaze. She looked at him troubled, but nodded. Together they rode through the open gate. The village consisted of a group of symmetrically arranged houses. Like the farmhouse where they had stayed some nights before, the houses had only one floor with no windows. The central path led to the yard of a dwelling that resembled both a fortress and a farmhouse. A central stone tower separated two low wooden buildings. They had not encountered a human since they entered the village and the yard was also deserted, but smoke was billowing from several chimneys.

Even before Erchirion dismounted, a large dog came running from behind the house. With bared teeth, he remained standing. Doubtfully, Lothiriel and Erchirion looked at each other, but soon the door of the large house was unlocked and a middle-aged woman opened the door.

"We are Lord Erchirion and Lady Lothiriel," said Erchirion, "we come from Dol Amroth to visit Lord Ulfur and Lady Vera." The woman looked at them doubtfully, but welcomed them. She sent the dog inside, then called out something to someone standing behind her, and a moment later a young lad came out who, as soon as they had dismounted, took the horses from them. Once inside, Lothiriel and Erchirion were led into a large living room where a hearth fire burned and where they were invited to take a seat on a wooden bench covered with hides and cushions. An older man brought firewood. As he piled it beside the hearth, he looked at them over his shoulder inquiringly. "You are looking for the Lord and Lady Vera," he said in common language. "They are off to the spring market in Aldburg. Only Lord Ulfur's youngest daughter is there, but she is not feeling well."

Erchirion's face tightened. "I know Aldburg," he said. "We went there last summer. It is the home village of Éomer and Éowyn," he told Lothiriel.

The man looked at them in surprise. "You know the king and his sister?" he said as he stood up.

Erchirion and Lothiriel nodded. "We are friends from South Gondor," Erchirion said.

"You are a long way from home," the man said. "I do not expect the Lord and Lady Vera back until the day after tomorrow. The best thing is to travel after them to Aldburg."

"How far is Aldburg from here?" said Erchirion.

"Four or five hours, it depends on how tired your horses are," the man said.

"There's nothing else to do," Lothiriel said. "Having come this far, we won't give up."

Erchirion smiled and nodded. Ulfur's housekeeper insisted that they eat a bowl of hot soup with bread before their departure, and in the meantime her husband explained to them how to ride.

When Éomer walked into the great hall the day after his return from the Hornburg, it looked remarkably deserted. "Where is everyone?" he called out.

Guthbrand, his secretary walked into the room. "Your sister has asked me to pass on a message," he said. "She traveled yesterday with Prince Faramir to Aldburg where they will attend the spring fair. It is her wish that you join them."

"Was Prince Faramir here?" said Éomer as he seated himself at the table closest to the fire.

Guthbrand nodded. "He arrived here unexpectedly. About two weeks ago."

"Why did no one notify me?" said Éomer. "For such a visit, I would have gladly shortened my trip."

"Your sister and her fiancée expressly asked not to disturb you, sir, for they had much to discuss," Guthbrand said. "About marriage and construction work in Itilien."

Éomer frowned. "Is it then my fate to come home from a wet trip to a cold, empty house?" he growled.

"Your house is not empty, sir," Guthbrand said. "I am here and there is work to do."

And so King Éomer and his secretary set to work. They made reports of Éomer's consultations with his marshals, they answered letters and visited the constructions he had commissioned in Edoras. After noon, word came from Lady Alfreda that she was happy to accompany him to the spring market at Aldburg. Éomer thought for a while, walked out of the hall and went to see her.

After Ulvâker, Aldburg was a real surprise. The road to it had been partly on small paths and partly on the Great Road, and Lothiriel and Erchirion had been following a narrow but paved road with farms and houses on either side for several miles now. It was already dusk when they finally entered the village, but unlike Ulvâker, the place was crowded with people. Behind the gate was a paved square with houses that, as in Dol Amroth, were built against each other and lit with torches. The houses had more than one floor with the top floor, under the pointed roof, partly overhanging the square. They were decorated with banners and had windows, behind which fires burned from fireplaces and candles. From tall poles in the square hung green flags with the white horse that Lothiriel recognized as the flag of Rohan.

They stopped at an inn. "Let's ask for information here," Erchirion said. "And arrange a place to sleep. I'm afraid our search for Vera will have to wait until tomorrow."

And while Lothiriel waited by the horses, Erchirion stepped inside. Lothiriel, meanwhile, was feasting her eyes. From where she stood she looked straight at a street that ran up from the square, even further into the hills. At the corner of the square and the street stood a large, stately two-story house. It was one of the only houses built entirely of stone, and it had several windows behind which light shone. Given the decorations and crowds in the square, it was clear that the spring market Ulfur's servant had spoken of was a true festival.

A group of people passed her and Lothiriel realized she recognized one of them. "Faramir?" she called out.

Prince Faramir turned and now looked as surprised as his cousin. Faramir was not the only familiar one. Now that they were getting closer, she also recognized Lady Éowyn and Lord Elfhelm. The reunion was cordial. Elfhelm was just about to introduce her to the other members of their party when Erchirion stepped out of the inn and looked at the group from beneath the light of the torches. Lothiriel watched him stiffen at the sight of the young woman whom she now suspected was Vera. Vera clasped her hands in front of her mouth and looked at Erchirion with wide eyes. He smiled, cautiously. She lowered her hands and smiled back. In a few steps he was with her and their embrace was so close that Lothiriel spontaneously had tears in her eyes. The others of the party were glowing and some passersby reacted happily at the sight of so much love. Only the man behind Elfhelm did not gloat. In his eyes shone a stubbornness such as Lothiriel had rarely seen.

Erchirion was startled by the ringing of the bell and looked over his shoulder at the bar. He watched as the innkeeper released the bell, took money from an older man and then put it in a jar.

"The bets are going well," said Faramir, who was sitting across from him.

Erchirion hid his face behind his hands. "What have I done," he groaned. "I brought Lothiriel here to ensure my own happiness when there is no hope for her." Distraught, he looked above his hands at Faramir. "While there is no hope for either of us."

"Éomer can bring hope," Faramir said.

"Éomer can also bring despair," Erchirion replied gruffly. He looked at the people in the inn. "These people know him. He grew up here and until a year ago he lived here. If they are betting on his upcoming engagement, the situation is serious." He took a sip from his cup. "If he comes at all. Éowyn fears he will ..."

"He is coming," Faramir interrupted him. "And when he comes he will find a solution for Vera and you. And he will talk to Lothiriel and ..." Again the bell chimed. Faramir frowned. "At worst, I'll take her back with me to Minas Tirith," he said.

The two men looked at each other with concern.

"How long is the drive to Edoras?" said Erchirion after a while.

"At a gallop five or six hours."

"And what time did Elfhelm send his messenger out?"

"Last night. Éomer got the message this morning at the latest," Faramir said. "He is coming." It sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

Moments later, Éowyn and Vera silently joined them. "Where is Lothiriel?" asked Erchirion after they had passed on their order.

"She's still at the market," Éowyn said with a sigh. "She wanted to buy a scarf and some souvenirs. I promised her we'd meet back at the bridge in an hour." She took Faramir's hand. "I hope my brother comes," she said. At the bar, the bell rang again. She closed her eyes for a moment. "And that he comes alone."

Erchirion had put his arm around Vera's shoulder and looked at her lovingly. "I love you, Vera," he said. "With or without your father's permission, I love you."

Vera kissed him on the cheek. "And with or without father's permission I'll marry you," she said.

Erchirion squeezed her on the shoulder. "Though of course we don't want to cause a political incident."

Vera shook her head. "I hope King Éomer comes and father listens to him."

"I suspect you don't want to tell me which of the two ladies will end up being the lucky one?" the innkeeper said as he brought their order. "For now, Lady Alfreda from the West Mark is in the lead, but personally I would put my money on Lady Holdwena from the East Mark."

Four faces looked at him in despair. "Good, good," the man said. "I see he's keeping you in suspense, too." He turned and a moment later the bell rang again.

They sat drinking in silence for a while. "Has anyone actually told Lothiriel that he might be coming?" said Vera. Startled, they looked at each other, then fell back into somber silence.

Lothiriel had already gone through the market twice. The merchandise here was very different from what she found in the market in Gondor. Instead of finely woven linen, they sold mostly

woolen fabrics here. The leather was worked differently and the pottery was darker in color. From the blacksmith she eventually bought a pair of scissors the size of her little finger and some amulets. From a young girl she bought a blue-gray wool scarf and then she returned to the leather workers' stall. She felt and smelled the leather merchandise, hesitated between a leather belt with a horse's head as a buckle and an equally beautiful fanny pack. She bought both as well as a beautiful leather-bound sketchbook. She buckled the belt with the fanny pack around her dress, tucked her purchases in and wrapped the scarf around her shoulders. Then she went in search of her company.

With the sun going down, fire pits had been lit in the square and people moved like moths to the light. Heavy clouds drifted into the valley from the mountains, and the temperature seemed to drop even further. Lothiriel pulled the hood of her cloak over her head, rubbed her hands and stamped her feet, but the cold did not easily dissipate. With her eyes, she searched the crowd. The windows of the large house on the corner of the square, Elfhelm's house, were dark. Nevertheless, it had been full, for Elfhelm had insisted that Erchirion and she stay with him, in addition to all the other guests he hosted. Now Vera's father was the only acquaintance she saw. He was standing near a fire pit by the bridge where she had agreed to meet Éowyn and Vera. Near him stood a group of men. Despite her resistance, Lothiriel walked toward them.

"As I find you here, may I ask your advice," she heard Ulfur say. "It concerns my daughter Vera." Lothiriel was startled, crawled even deeper into her hood and stood with her back to the little group. She held out her hands toward the fire and pricked up her ears curiously.

"The matter of your daughter should not be discussed here in the square," said the man to whom the question had been put. Despite the fire, Lothiriel froze on the spot. Éomer! She moved to the other side of the pit and peered from under her hood at the men. She now recognized Éolif, Éomer's cousin, with beside him the tall and broad silhouette of the king. Éomer blew into his hands. As if paralyzed, Lothiriel stared at him.

"King Éomer, surely I cannot give my daughter to a man of Gondor." Ulfur's voice sounded unsteady and he put his hand on Éomer's arm.

"I would not know why not," Éomer said quietly, "the men of Gondor are noble and trustworthy. And the man in question is one of the most noble and trustworthy of all." Lothiriel's heart beat in her throat. She was unable to avert her gaze from him and watched in fascination as his breath, as he spoke, blew clouds. "Is it her own choice to marry this man?" said Éomer.

"Unfortunately, yes," Vera's father said.

"Then leave the choice to your daughter, even if she chooses a man from Gondor. But I suggest we discuss this further tonight." Éomer rubbed his hands and turned toward the fire, but Ulfur stopped him.

"That means leaving everything behind, including her family and even her country." His voice hissed.

"That, unfortunately, is the fate of daughters," Éomer said. A frown appeared on his forehead. "That is precisely why it is important that the choice be theirs. And as long as he loves her and shows her respect, it doesn't matter if she marries a man from Gondor or from Rohan." He put his hand on Vera's father's shoulder. "She will love you more when you leave the stable door ajar so she can leave the stable as she pleases." Ulfur's look had something desperate

about it. "Think about it. We'll discuss it tonight," Éomer said in a decided tone. Again he turned to the fire pit. He stretched out his hands.

Lothiriel hesitated, swallowed and straightened her shoulders. "But will there still be room in the stable when she decides to return later?" she said.

Éomer looked in wonder at the hooded person on the other side of the fire. "Lothiriel?" She let the hood slide off her head and Éomer's eyes got big with surprise. Then he laughed. "Always," he said. "There's always room for you."

Lothiriel smiled through her tears.

"Why didn't anyone tell me you were here," he said as he took a step closer and grabbed her hands. "You're cold." He rubbed her hands between his, and all the while Lothiriel stood looking at him smiling and crying at the same time.

"I'm here with Erchirion," she finally said. "And I think you helped him quite a bit just now. You gave Lord Ulfur excellent advice."

He smiled. "I merely gave him the advice someone embroidered into my shirt." Both his look and voice became more serious now. "All that embroidery must have taken you hours." He pulled her hands under his cloak and pressed them to his chest. Even through all the layers of clothing, Lothiriel could feel his heart beating. "I'm sorry I was so impatient and so proud," he said.

"I'm sorry, too," she said. "I shouldn't have reacted so stubbornly. And I should have trusted my heart, because sometimes ... sometimes it just feels right." They looked at each other and read in each other's eyes the joy of reunion. Around them, the bustle of the market continued, people walked by, many remained standing, but they didn't notice. Thick snowflakes swirled down, nestled in their hair and clung to their cloaks. In the distance, someone called their name. Éomer bent toward her and kissed her.

Again Erchirion was sitting opposite Faramir in the inn. With the help of Éolif, he had managed to guide King Éomer and Lothiriel through the crowd that had gathered around them in the square. They had made it as far as the inn, where they now sat in a private parlor on the upper floor. The common-room below them was filled with curious citizens, many of whom now realized their loss. For all safety, Éolif stood guard at the door.

"When I learned from Elfhelm that bets were being made about my alleged engagement, I planned not to come to the spring fair," Éomer said. "I hoped the interest in my love life would blow over." He squeezed Lothiriel's hand. "Since I met you, no other woman has touched my heart. And the gossip and the bets based on it are completely out of whack."

"Lady Alfreda was the fiancée of our cousin Théodred," said Éowyn. "After Théodred passed away, she just stayed in Edoras."

"Until yesterday," Éomer said. "I asked her to return to her parents village." Éowyn drew wide eyes. "And Lady Holdwena is an old acquaintance I had actually forgotten about until Elfhelm informed me of the betting," Éomer said.

Lothiriel sat silently listening, and she saw that he was not only telling the truth, but also that he cared that she believed him. She looked at their hands that had not let go of each other since their reunion at the fire pit and braided her fingers through his. "I believe you," she said.

“And now that I see your subjects firing at you, I'm even more sorry I made you wait so long.” She looked at him with an uncertain smile. “But I must admit, with all the stories I've heard over the past few days, I was convinced I was too late.”

“So you knew about the gossip,” Erchirion said. “After all the effort I made to keep you away from it.”

“It was hard not to hear it,” she said. “And you made it clear to me that I had to prepare for the worst.”

“I'm glad you persevered,” Éomer said. “I still can't believe you're here.”

“Only those who persevere get to the finish line,” Lothiriel said. “Though I feared the race was over before I left.” She looked at Éomer. “What about Erchirion and Vera? Do you think you can do anything for them?”

“That is my intention,” he said. “But it won't be easy. Ulfur is not named for nothing after the wolves that sometimes make the hills here unsafe.”

Éomer called the innkeeper. “Is it true,” he said, “that there are no winners of the bet?”

The innkeeper stared bemusedly at his shoes. “There are indeed no winners, King Éomer. You have outsmarted us all.”

“In that case, I suggest the money in the jar be used to give all down here something to drink,” Éomer said. “I suspect you still have a back door?” The innkeeper nodded. “Good. Then that's our way out.”

On the way out, the innkeeper stopped Éomer. “We would like to know, sir,” he said hesitantly, “what is the name of your fiancée.”

Éomer laughed. “Give us time, man. She's had a long journey. I'll tell you her name as soon as she gives me her yes.”

Lothiriel looked through the window without seeing anything. Occasionally she threw a glance over her shoulder at the closed door of Elfhelm's room, or caught an equally restless glance from Éowyn or Faramir. Elfhelm's wife, his children and grandchildren had left the house and, despite the snow, were enjoying music and dancing in the square with their fellow villagers. For those who stayed behind, the revelry depended on the results of the discussion. That had initially taken place between Éomer, Elfhelm and Ulfur. Eventually, Erchirion and Vera were also called to the room. Lothiriel sighed.

When the door finally opened, Erchirion and Vera were the first to come out. Their gaze was reserved and both Lothiriel, Éowyn and Faramir looked at them with concern. But as soon as the door closed behind them, the two lovers flew around each other laughing. Lothiriel spontaneously began to laugh along, and Éowyn and Faramir also looked at each other with relief. “We are getting married,” Erchirion said laughing as he held Vera tightly. “We're getting married!” he said again. He seemed to be bursting with happiness. Lothiriel flew toward them and hugged them so impetuously that they fell against each other like drunken men.

At that moment, Elfhelm's family returned home and not only Erchirion, but the entire house seemed to burst. Lothiriel stood there smiling as she suddenly felt Éomer's hand around hers. Smiling, she looked up at him. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Éomer smiled back. “What do you think, shall we leave the revelry behind for a while and seek peace and quiet?” Lothiriel nodded.

The path behind Elfhelm's house was unpaved and sloped slowly upward around a small hill. The other side of the path was lined with willows that suggested the presence of a stream. Hand in hand, Lothiriel and Éomer walked away from the festivities until it was completely quiet and dark. "By the way, how is the women's company doing in Dol Amroth?" he asked after a while.

"Good," she said. "They are doing well. The important thing now is that they continue to practice their skills, although I hope they will never be forced to use them." She paused. "Éomer, I still think it's important for women to learn to defend themselves." She also took his other hand and looked at him. "But these women are very motivated. I think they can get on without me."

Éomer squeezed her hands. "Come with me," he said. "I want to show you something." He led her across a narrow bridge into a field that grew wider and wider, to the edge of a small lake. Although the moon squeaked through the clouds only occasionally, Lothiriel distinguished the outline of a house that stood lonely and dark at the lake's edge.

"This is the oldest part of Aldburg," Éomer said, "and of Rohan. This is where Eorl and his family settled after coming from the North. This is where Éowyn and I were born."

Lothiriel looked at him in surprise. "King Elessar told me about your history," she said. "His stories made me dream about Rohan and about ..." At that moment the moon shone in full glory on the dark house which, it now appeared, was not solitary, but part of a group of houses. But her gaze was particularly drawn to the jetty that ran into the small lake, the little beach of river stones and the waterfall that flowed into the lake on the other side between the rocks. Unconsciously, Lothiriel held her breath. Beside her, she heard Éomer laughing. "Here a child can only be happy," she said softly, and in her mind's eye she saw a small, blond boy jumping from the jetty into the water.

"I was happy here," Éomer said. He pulled Lothiriel toward him until she leaned her back against his chest. "I have hardly been here for the past year. I didn't think it was appropriate because Elfhelm settled here after I made him Marshal of the East Mark and I didn't want to get in his way." He sighed. "But now, I'm considering spending my summers here."

"As long as your fellow villagers leave you alone," Lothiriel chuckled. Éomer laughed. He buried his face in her hair and sniffed. Smiling, Lothiriel thought of little Velta and she snuggled closer to him.

"Why are you here, Lothiriel?" asked Éomer after a while. He turned her around so he could see her face.

"I no longer had any reason to stay away," she said. "On the contrary, my body was in Gondor, but my heart and soul were here." She put her hand on his jaw. "And after all my hesitation, I was almost too late."

He shook his head. "No," he said and then he started laughing, "you're rather too early because the bathhouse isn't ready yet."

"What?" she said.

"Dear Lothiriel, when I heard that my sister was determined to invite you to her wedding, in a last-ditch effort to win your heart, I started building a new bathhouse in Edoras. As part of a much more elaborate charm offensive."

Lothiriel now began to laugh as well. "I will love to take a bath in your bathhouse, and with equal love I will dive into any lake or river."

"With love?" he said. "Do you love me, Lothiriel?"

"I love you Éomer Protector of woman and horse, Éomer the Concerned, Éomer the Bringer of hope and p ..." He gagged her with a kiss.

"Marry me," he said. "Please, Lothiriel, marry me. Become my wife, the mother of my children, my queen."

"I will marry you," she said. "I will marry you with love, bear your children and take care of every one entrusted to me." For a moment Éomer looked at her speechlessly, then he lifted her up and spun her around laughing.

The first snowball flew with a perfect arc through the night and burst into Éomer's neck. The second hit Lothiriel's left ear and the third missed them by a hair. With a sound midway between a growl and a laugh, Éomer broke free from their embrace. A moment later, a snowball flew in the opposite direction and hit Erchirion in the middle of the chest. "Is a man still allowed to kiss his girl?" cried Éomer.

"That girl does happen to be my sister," Erchirion called back. The back door of Elfhelm's house opened and Vera, looking for her fiancé, got a snowball right in her face. Fifteen minutes and many snowballs later, the four of them stood laughing and shaking the snow out of their hair. "Can you make some peace with Ulfur's condition," Éomer asked after a while.

Vera looked at Erchirion mischievously, wrapped her arms around his chest and smiled. "Since my father wants to see me for at least a month every year, unless I am heavily pregnant, we plan to have many children," she said.

"A house full of little Erchirions," laughed Lothiriel, "that will be a challenge."

Éomer raised his eyebrows. "Otherwise, it would be nice for Lothiriel to see her brother regularly," he said.

Erchirion looked at them appreciatively. "So, the question has been asked," he said, "and the answer has been given." Then he flew around their necks laughing.

A moment later, they slipped back inside and joined the bustle in Elfhelm's living room. "My house is cold and empty," Éomer said to Elfhelm. "May I call on your hospitality and spend the night here?"

"You certainly may," said Elfhelm. "But my house has never been so full. You'll have to share a room with Faramir and Erchirion."

Éomer laughed. "I will gladly share a room with my future brothers-in-law," he said. All conversation fell silent and everyone looked from Éomer to Lothiriel who was biting her lip nervously. Éomer took her hand. "We have not one, but two engagements to celebrate," he said. For the second time that evening, an avalanche of congratulations broke out.

"Our fellow villagers were right about one thing after all," said Elfhelm. "Our king got engaged today."

Éomer looked through the window at the square where the party was still going on. "What do you think," he said to his fiancée, "shall we give them what they asked for?"

Lothiriel turned pale. "What will your people say, Éomer, now that you chose neither a woman from the East Mark nor from the West Mark?"

“The wisest among them will say that I am a good king because I know how to curb their ambitions and mutual jealousy. The elders will say that there will finally be peace in my house. And those who love me will be silent because they see that I am happy,” he said. “The others will grit their teeth for a while, but they too will soon love their queen because she is beautiful, caring and spontaneous.” He pulled her into his arms and kissed her on the forehead. “Don't be afraid,” he said, “just be the Lothiriel I fell head over heels in love with.”

“Now I wish I had brought a more festive dress,” she said frowning.

“Who looks sullen now,” Éomer said, shaking his head with a laugh. “People will love you more in a simple dress.”

Lothiriel answered his laughter. “You are right,” she said. “After all the anxiety, I will not worry about a dress, but enjoy this unexpected happiness.”

“May I offer you a first engagement gift,” Faramir said a moment later. He handed Éomer a scroll. “It is given to you by King Elessar and Queen Arwen. They apparently had more faith in your hearts than you yourselves.”

Even before Éomer unrolled the parchment, Lothiriel knew what it was. She clasped her hands before her mouth. “Thorongil in the service of King Thengel of Rohan,” Éomer read. “Told by King Elessar and written down by Lady Lothiriel, daughter of Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth, in the year 3020.” Éomer looked at Lothiriel with wide eyes.

“I wrote travelogues for King Elessar last winter,” she said. “Your grandfather, father and King Théoden are named in them.”

“I'm glad I carried it all the way through Rohan for a reason,” Faramir said, patting Éomer on the shoulder. “It's a first piece for your library.”

Éomer laughed. “And the second piece will be the story of Eorl,” he said. “I will tell it and Queen Lothiriel of Rohan will write it down.” Then he took his betrothed by the hand. “Come,” he said, “it is time to introduce you to our people.”

Éolif walked out of his king's room. He was in such a hurry that he almost bumped into Lothiriel. “The wedding makes him nervous,” he said sighing.

“He loves his sister,” Lothiriel said. “He has a hard time letting her go.” She patted his shoulder. “I'll go see him.”

Éomer sat on his bed, his head resting on his hands. She walked up to him and kissed him on the head. “Let me help you,” she said. “Trust me.” Frowning, he watched as she knelt at his feet and took off his boots and stockings agonizingly slowly. “I happen to be good with feet,” she said as she mischievously wiggled her eyebrows up and down.

Éomer's eyes grew large. “Oh, no,” he groaned.

“Close your eyes,” she said. With a desperate look, he put his fist in his mouth and then closed his eyes. A moment later, his laughter echoed through Edoras.

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