

Beregari's birthday present

Beregari was happy to have one week's leave from his Army obligations so that he could celebrate his twenty-first birthday with his family. He was posted in Ithilien anyway, so it was easy to have a short amount of leave and return. He was glad he wasn't posted somewhere far-flung, like Harad. The brothers of his childhood friend Morwen had all done stints in Harad. Even her sister Idis had attempted to serve there, but had been hauled home after being discovered posing as a man.

Tolthion said, "What are you going to do for your birthday, Beregar?"

Beregari shrugged. "Have a party with my family and childhood friends. Nothing particularly exciting."

"Your folks are in Eryn Arnien, right?" said Olthamir.

"Yes." Beregar did not elaborate. He felt it was boastful to explain more: not everyone's grandfather had been Captain for the Prince of Ithilien.

"You going to finally get some experience with women when you get home, sir?" said Tolthion, nudging him.

Beregari blushed; he had become rather notorious for his unwillingness to dally with camp followers or barmaids. There were *reasons* for this, but he did not feel particularly comfortable sharing them with his regiment. His father and his grandfather had already expressed their doubts about those reasons on several occasions, and spoken to him severely.

Olthamir laughed. "I deem he really does have a girl waiting at home," he said to Tolthion. "He won't show us those letters he gets—but that handwriting looks like female handwriting to me—"

"It's complicated," said Beregar, because it was. "I'll explain one day, maybe."

"You can keep your secrets for now, sir," said Tolthion. "We'll get them out of you eventually."

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When Beregar got home, he hugged his mother and father. "What do you want for your special dinner?" said his mother.

"Roast chicken, please," said Beregar.

"I'll ask the Lady if she has any," said his mother.

"I can ask?" said Beregar.

His father looked at him. "*Berry*—"

"I know, I know," said Beregar. "I'm being very careful. You and Grandfather have made that clear."

His mother shook her head. "Don't blame me if you get your heart broken. We all warned you—!"

Beregar loped out of the house before anyone could lecture him further. His grandfather's lectures were worse than the fabled Pits of Doom.

He made his way up the winding streets of Eryn Arnen, waving to people as he went. When he reached the gates of the manor, the guards looked at him, and one touched the rim of his helm. "Lieutenant Beregar. On leave?"

"Only for a week—it's my birthday in two days," said Beregar.

"Very good," said the other guard.

"I'm just going to ask the Lady if she has chickens Ma can use for my birthday dinner," said Beregar.

The first guard grinned. "Sure, sure. Go through, lad."

Beregar looked up at the wattle and daub and stone edifice in front of him, and climbed up the familiar set of front steps. A servant came out, and then said, "O, hullo, Lieutenant Beregar, can I fetch Lady Morwen for you?"

Beregar felt himself flushing, and recalled his father's warning. "Ah. I'm just here to ask Lady Éowyn about the availability of chickens. It's for my birthday dinner, you see."

"Very good, I'll just let our Lady know." The servant waked off.

As expected, the Lady Éowyn came out shortly afterwards. "Berry!" she said, and kissed him on the forehead. "You may have as many chickens as you need, my dear. Just tell Aedwen, and she'll send them down. You should know that!"

"I'll tell Ma," said Beregar, uncomfortably. "She'll try to pay you for them, you know, because they're not really in season—"

Lady Éowyn sighed. "As always, I will refuse to take her money. Your grandfather saved Faramir's life, and for that we are ever in your family's debt—"

"Is Morwen about?" Beregar had been trying to resist asking, but his resolve broke.

Lady Éowyn smiled gently: she was still so very beautiful, even though she was quite old. "Morwen's just upstairs. She's very much looking forward to your birthday dinner. Do you want me to get her?"

"Er, I suppose so," said Beregar, shifting on his feet.

"Wait here," said Lady Éowyn.

Shortly afterwards, Morwen came bouncing down the stairs, and embraced him enthusiastically. "Berry! You're on leave now?"

"Yes," said Beregar. "I'm just here to ask for chickens for my birthday dinner."

Morwen sighed, just as her mother had. "I've told you before: ask, and I will get whatever you need."

Bereggar flushed. "The horse was too much, Lady Morwen! I remain in your debt!"

Morwen looked irritated. "Let's go to our favourite place in the garden. We can discuss this there."

Bereggar said, "I'm too big for the tree house now."

Morwen looked up at him and drew closer. "Yes, I suppose you are?" Then she grabbed him by the arm. "We shall go to the barn then."

"Er," said Beregar. "Are you sure that's *proper*?"

Morwen winked, and spoke more quietly, standing on tiptoe to speak into his ear. "You didn't mind last time. And I don't see what the problem is, given that we shall marry?"

Bereggar looked at her with equal measures of frustration and adoration. "Morwen. That was a game we played when we were children—!"

"My family does not play games." Morwen put her head on the side. "Well, we do at times, but it tends to go badly because we're all so competitive. And then Idis loses her temper and rips up the board—"

Bereggar laughed. "That was *hilarious*. She got so angry when Cirion told her the knights couldn't move like that."

"See, we don't care what the rules say," said Morwen, linking her arm with his, and pulling him through the corridors out into the garden. "If we want the knights to move like *that*, then they shall."

"It's all very well for you to say," said Beregar. It was one of the things that frustrated him about this family: they ignored constraints because they could, but not everyone had that liberty. In fact, there were very few people on Middle Earth who had that liberty.

They walked to the barn, then climbed the ladder to the hayloft. As soon as they were seated, Morwen grabbed Beregar, and kissed him. "I missed you," she said.

Bereggar enjoyed the feel of her lips against his and her soft brown hair. "I missed you too."

They did not speak much more for some time, then Morwen began to undo her dress.

"No," said Beregar.

Morwen paused. "I need your touch. I'll do the same for you—you know what I *mean*—just choose what you want—"

"If my father and grandfather ever find out about this, they will kill me," said Beregar. "And I don't know what *your* father will say—"

To Beregar's extreme surprise, Morwen burst out laughing. "O, Berry, my dear, naïve darling!"

"What?" said Beregar.

Morwen undid the bodice of her dress, then began to slide out of it. "Daddy is aware of everything that we do. Both my parents know—"

Beregar had been looking with interest at Morwen's lovely round, full breasts peeping above her corset, but at this, he paused, his right hand on her left breast, and his left hand on her hip. "No! What you say cannot be true!"

"*Of course* they're aware," said Morwen, with confusion. "If Daddy didn't approve, you'd be somewhere else, not in Ithilien. And my parents would not have let me give you that horse when you joined the Army—"

"I can't cope with this," said Beregar, taking his hands off her. "I need to go home and tell Ma about the chickens."

Morwen looked up at him, her big grey-blue eyes wide, and her lower lip trembling. "Don't you love me, Berry?"

"Whether I love you or not is not to the point." Beregar stepped away. He was confused about what he felt at this particular moment. "This is just too much—"

"Don't go!" said Morwen, tears spilling. "I need you!"

Beregar paused at the top of the ladder, feeling like the worst kind of cad. "I'm so sorry, Morwen. I need time to myself. But I will see you at my birthday dinner, I hope?"

Morwen sniffed and wiped the tears away, and then suddenly a disturbingly resolute expression came across her face, and she put up her chin, looking very like her father for a moment. "Indeed you will see me, Beregar."

"Good bye," said Beregar, and then swiftly climbed down the ladder, and returned back to his house in the village. He could not help comparing it with the edifice of Emyn Arnen above. It was a very nice house, but it was not a castle, like Emyn Arnen.

He opened the wooden front door and found his mother in the parlour. "Lady Éowyn is going to send down some pullets."

"How much do I owe her, and—O, *Berry*—I knew you wouldn't be able to stop yourself!"

"What do you mean?" said Beregar.

His mother drew him over to the fireplace so that he could look in the mirror there. He saw that he had a lovebite on his neck, and put his hand up to cover it. "O no. I'll put on a higher necked shirt? Or a cravat? And—well—Morwen did kiss me, but then I said I had to go home—"

His mother sighed, and shook her head as he met her eyes in the mirror. "That's rather more than a kiss, dear."

"I stopped it at that point," said Beregar. "Morwen said her parents *know* about, well, the things that made Father and Grandfather cross, and they don't care."

"I very much doubt that," said his mother briskly. "They're well above us, Berry."

Beregarran upstairs before his father could see evidence of Lady Morwen's affection, and tied a cravat around his neck. It looked a bit odd, but he could not bear another lecture. Then he went downstairs and sat in the library and read for a time to take his mind off the fact he'd had to disappoint Morwen. He did not know what to do. His father came in during the afternoon and said, "Hullo, Berry—why on Middle Earth are you wearing that stupid scarf?"

"No reason," said Beregar. "It's the latest fashion."

His father pulled at the scarf and saw the lovebite. "I thought so," he said, shaking his head. "Your mother and I both thought so."

"I went home before we did anything that might make you upset," said Beregar. "Morwen was a bit upset with me—"

"Not as upset as her father will be if he sees that!" said his father.

"She says he knows about ... *us*."

"Nonsense," said his father. "I mean, I know he *knows* things, but if he knew *that* you'd be in darkest Rhûn. You're hardly the Steward of Arnor, Berry, for all that you're a good lad."

"They let Cirion marry Fíriel," said Beregar, spreading his hands.

His father laughed. "They'd have let that Cirion marry *anyone*, Berry, just so he'd keep it in his pants. But the rest of them—think about it—Lady Galadhel for Elboron, the Steward of Arnor for Finduilas, Lady Norien for Túrin, and even that queer fellow Ecthelion lives with is a Lord, is he not?"

"So I believe," said Beregar. "Morwen says Ecthelion's better now, than he used to be?"

"I've no idea what happened to that boy?—he was as quiet and shy as can be, and then suddenly he's running around embarrassing his poor parents," said his father, shaking his head. "I do feel sorry for the Prince and the Lady, because they brought those children up well, but there's always *one*. And then there's Idis and her *moods*—she's a nice girl, but very melancholy—"

"Morwen says she's doing better too," said Beregar. "She's been working in the Citadel or something? Helping them solve crimes or some such?"

"If I was a criminal I wouldn't want to cross *her*," said his father.

"I believe that's part of her appeal for them," said Beregar.

"Well, come and have your supper then," said his father, pulling the scarf back up. "And I'll just tell your grandparents that the scarf's a *fashion thing*."

"Thank you, Father," said Beregar.

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The next day, Beregar rode out, and then went for a long walk in the forest by himself. He did not know who he could talk to about Morwen. None of his relatives were any good, nor any of

Morwen's family. He considered asking Lady Galadhel but then remembered that she was presently in Minas Tirith with Lord Elboron. He did not know Lady Fíriel well enough to ask her about this matter, for all that she seemed very pleasant.

He climbed up to the top of a rock escarpment and sat in the sun and thought. He had been Morwen's friend since he was born. They'd grown up together, played together, and gone to lessons together. She had first announced an intention to marry him when she was six years old, and he was five years old. He had quite happily acquiesced in her game, because he had thought then that she was the most marvellous and beautiful girl he had ever seen (he still thought this). He had been startled when his and her brothers had laughed heartily at the outfit Morwen had constructed for their 'wedding': a pink blanket as a cloak, a paper crown, a golden veil, and a massive bunch of pink roses. At the time he had thought he looked regal, although there was no way now in which he was ever going to let anyone garb him in a pink blanket and a golden veil ever again. Idis had gotten cross with the brothers for laughing at him and Morwen, and had chased them shouting, "Leave Berry alone!" Beregar had always had a soft spot for Idis ever since, melancholy silences and random dagger throwing notwithstanding.

He had never kissed any girl, other than Morwen. He and Morwen first played 'Mummies and Daddies' when they were about seven or eight, as well as 'Surgeons and Healers', which had involved a thorough inspection of all parts of the body. Ecthelion had discovered them lying naked in the treehouse, Beregar on top of Morwen, as part of the Mummies and Daddies game, and told on them, which Beregar thought was rather ironic given Ecthelion's later behaviour. They had explained earnestly that they were not doing anything bad: they were just behaving like Mummies and Daddies did, which caused Beregar's parents to almost die of embarrassment, whereas the Lady Éowyn had become hysterical with laughter, so that the Prince had to send her away.

Later, during their teenage years, it had seemed natural to experiment with each other, particularly given Morwen's insistence that she was going to marry him anyway. This time, his father had discovered them in Beregar's room when he was fifteen and Morwen was sixteen, which had been the impetus first, for banning them from going to either of their rooms alone, and secondly, for the first of several lectures from his parents and grandparents that he was not to behave dishonourably with the Prince's daughter.

When he had gone into the Army at the age of seventeen, Beregar had thought that would be the end of it, and Morwen would be betrothed to some Lord, just as his parents had warned. He was still not particularly interested in any other woman. No other woman had Morwen's beautiful smile or big blue-grey eyes. To his surprise, Morwen wrote to him while he was away. Then, when he returned home on leave, she'd turned up at his house as soon as she'd heard of his return.

"You've not been betrothed to anyone in my absence?" Beregar had said in the hayloft at her parents' estate, after a rather passionate reconciliation, where they did just about everything, except the one thing his parents had said he was absolutely not to do.

Morwen had slowly put her stockings back on, the sun from the window picking up the gold in her long brown hair. "No! I don't know why you won't listen to me on this, Berry. Of course I'm going to marry *you*. And then we are going to live on a lovely farm, where I shall raise sheep."

Beregar had laughed. But now he was wondering: had it been a joke? And had he ever had any choice in this matter? If her parents did know about the hayloft incidents, and even thought it was acceptable for them to marry, did he want to marry Morwen? He could not imagine wanting to marry anyone else. He'd never looked at any other woman.

He jumped as speckled wood pigeons suddenly flew up out of the trees, making a flapping noise, and then realised that he had been sitting there for a long time, and the sun had gone behind a cloud. It was time to go home.

The day of Beregar's twenty-first birthday was bright and clear, with only a few stray clouds in the sky, like stray sheep which had escaped from Morwen's dreams of a farm. His parents had prepared a delicious cooked breakfast for him, and gave him his present: a beautiful embossed scabbard for his sword. His grandfather Beregond and grandmother Bronwe presented him with a lovely gold pen. He thanked everyone, and then went to get ready for his birthday lunch.

He was surprised that he did not feel different. He prodded his face in the mirror: same long pale face, grey eyes and dark hair, just like his father Bergil and his grandfather Beregond. Then he shaved carefully and got dressed.

At midday, the Eryn Arnen estate guests turned up: Prince Faramir, Lady Éowyn, Lady Idis, Lord Húrin, Lord Dior, Lady Daerien, and of course, Morwen. Morwen was clad in her favourite colour, a kind of pale rose colour, and looked more beautiful than ever. He stammered with confusion at her greeting, to his family's disapproval, but Idis threw him a sympathetic look.

Then the Prince said, "Morwen has our present for you. She chose it for you herself."

Morwen took a package from her brother Dior and handed it to Beregar. Beregar opened it and gasped. It was a fur lined cloak, with matching hat and gloves.

"O, I deem that's made of mink from Rohan," said Idis, leaning over and peering at it. "A lovely present, Morwen."

Beregar's family gaped: the cloak was frankly princely.

"It is in case you get cold, when you are on night watch," said Morwen shyly.

"Thank you," said Beregar, and kissed her hand.

Then his mother led them all into the dining room where his grandparents were waiting. The Prince and the Lady greeted them warmly, and Grandpa looked happier than he had in a while. He was finding retirement difficult.

"You can always come visit," said Lady Éowyn. "We miss you, Beregond. We're just up the hill."

"Very good, my Lady," said Beregond, saluting, and then laughed: old habits died hard.

"I'm afraid that I don't think I can do as good a job with the chicken as you can, Lady Éowyn," said Beregar's mother nervously.

"It will be lovely," said Lady Éowyn, firmly.

When the food came out, his mother's fears proved baseless. Beregar finished off three servings.

"O, to be young again and have a bottomless appetite," said Beregond.

Eventually, servants came to clear the plates. Morwen stood, her voice quavering a little, and said, "Bereggar, would you mind coming out into the garden with me, before we have the sweets course?"

Bereggar stared at her. "What? Now? Into the garden?"

Morwen turned a little pink. "Yes. I need to talk to you."

Bereggar turned to his parents, and his parents shrugged and turned to the Prince and the Lady, and the Prince said, with an indulgent smile, "Go on, children. Off you go."

So Beregar rose and followed Morwen out into the garden.

"Er, thank you for the lovely cloak," he said, as he held the back door open for her.

"It is a pleasure." Morwen took his hand and led him out into the middle of the lawn.

Bereggar looked back. His family and her family were peering curiously through the window. "They are all looking at us."

Morwen waved at them all, then turned to Beregar. "That is my intention, Berry. But note: they cannot hear us."

"What are you doing, Morwen?"

She did not answer, but took his hands in hers. Her hands were shaking. "I want to ask you something."

"Very well," said Beregar, and squeezed her hands. "What is it?"

"Now you are of age, will you marry me, Beregar son of Bergil?" said Morwen.

Bereggar stared at her, his heart beating fast. "I am sorry. What did you say?"

Morwen smiled nervously at him. "You're never going to ask me, so I have to ask *you*, because otherwise your parents won't accept it: will you marry me?"

Bereggar blinked. "But your parents—my parents—? They'll never—?"

"Mummy and Daddy know *exactly* what I planned to ask today. I asked Daddy to instruct someone about drawing up a betrothal contract after we had that altercation the other day. We won't marry until I'm twenty five. I think a three year engagement is appropriate, don't you?"

"Er, well, in that case ... I say, yes?" said Beregar, in slight shock.

"Very good," said Morwen, suddenly beaming. "You're required to kiss me, you know?"

"With everyone watching?" said Beregar.

"Definitely," said Morwen, putting her arms around his neck. "Otherwise how will they know what you said?"

"O, very well then," said Beregar, and leaned down and kissed her.

Then he let go of her, and looked back at the window. Idis was clapping, and the Prince and Lady Éowyn were smiling. His parents looked like they were about to faint.

"How do you feel about wearing rose?" said Morwen.

It was important to ensure that his limits were established at the beginning. "I'll refuse to sign the betrothal contract if you make me wear even the slightest bit of rose, or a gold veil. In fact, I think it should be a term that I can break off the engagement in that event. I am very tolerant on many things, but a man has to draw the line *somewhere*."

Morwen sighed, but smiled. "I thought you might say that. I hope you don't mind *me* wearing rose when we marry?"

"Of course not," said Beregar. "You can wear as much as you want, in whatever shade you choose. Every day, all day, for all I care. As long as *I* do not have to wear it."

"Excellent," said Morwen. "Of course, Mummy and Daddy have an idea for us to live in that farm down in the valley—"

Beregar blinked. "You *really* want to run a farm?"

"I have good ideas for sheep," said Morwen.

Beregar shrugged. "I actually don't mind where we live or what we do, as long as I'm with you."

Morwen flung her arms around him. "O Berry! This is why I love you!"

Beregar kissed the top of her head carefully. "Your hair looks nice today, but that's a complicated arrangement there. How long did it take to do?"

"Quite a while," said Morwen. "I wanted to look *irresistible*."

"You always look irresistible," said Beregar.

"Let's go back in," said Morwen, grinning at him. She took his hand and pulled him back inside. Then she announced grandly to the room, "I have asked Beregar to marry me and he has said yes—"

"Uh, Lady Morwen—?" said Beregond.

"I will ensure you get a copy of the betrothal contracts, Beregond." Faramir smiled. "It makes me very happy to think that our families are united thus."

"It *does*?" said Beregar's father.

"Yes, it genuinely does," said Lady Éowyn gently.

“Uh,” said Beregar’s mother. “Does anyone want dessert?”

“Yes please,” said Idis. “Also congratulations, Morwen and Berry! I don’t understand why anyone is at all surprised about this given that Morwen decided she wanted to marry Berry when she was six? And that hasn’t changed since, despite me quizzing her on this intention at intervals, just to make sure she had not changed her mind—”

Morwen laughed. “O, Idie, you are so hilariously blunt.”

“How is your work in the Citadel going, Lady Idis?” said Beregar’s mother.

“Quite well,” said Idis, vaguely. “I was required to translate for a Haradric prisoner last week. He was saying some very rude things in Haradric and no one realised until I came down! I said to him that his mother would be ashamed by him, and he was most embarrassed. Apparently I have a similar accent to his childhood governess, and he wondered if I knew her, but I don’t—”

Beregar started to laugh. “I’m sure he was a little shocked!”

“Well yes, he was. He called me a ‘loose Gondorim whore’ before he realised I could understand him. I told him I was quite clearly not, because I wouldn’t do anything intimate with him for any amount of money—”

Beregar’s mother looked like she was about to faint. Meanwhile, Húrin laughed so hard he appeared to be having difficulty breathing. “By the Valar, Idie, you are *so funny*. I’m going to tell Aragorn this—he will *love* it.”

“Idis, my daughter!” said Faramir. “Language!”

“I am not the one who is rude, Father; it was that man—” said Idis. “I am simply reporting what he said.”

“He’s lucky *I* was not there,” said Éowyn. “No man calls *my* daughter a ‘loose Gondorim whore’—”

“Indeed,” said Idis. “I also explained that he was inaccurate because my mother was the Wraithslayer of Rohan and thus I was actually only half from Gondor, or a little over half if you count Queen Morwen, King Thengel’s wife, my great-grandmother. That is when he tried to run away from me. I’m pleased to report that the guards say he’s been much better behaved since then—”

At that point, possibly thankfully, servants entered with the dessert: cake, forest berries and cream. Everyone sang and Beregar blew out the candle.

“Why do we do this candle-thing, anyway?” said Éowyn. “We don’t do it in Rohan.”

“I don’t know, dear,” said Faramir. “It’s traditional.”

Beregar’s brother Beredor said, “Also, he has to cut the cake and kiss the nearest girl if the knife is dirty, Lady Éowyn.”

Morwen stood, picked up her chair, moved it next to Beregar, and sat, looking expectant. Everyone burst out laughing.

Beregar cut the cake, and of course, the knife was not clean. He kissed Morwen's cheek chastely, to cheers from everyone.

"Happy birthday son," said Beregar's father.

The next day, Beregar sat in the study with his father and his grandfather, both of whom were bearing contracts.

His grandfather shook his head. "I cannot believe it, Bergil. I just—still cannot quite believe it—"

"Beregar's a very good lad," said his father.

"Well, of course he is, but naytheless—" said Beregond, and stared out the window. "That being said, they have always acted on what they think is good and fair, not on what is popular. That's why I loved the Prince so—"

"He might think that he would not have children at all, but for you," said Beregar. "In fact, I think that's exactly how he feels."

His grandfather wiped his eyes. "The worst and the best day of my life. That death lies on me heavily, even now, but it was the right thing to do—"

Meanwhile his father had started reading. "By the Valar, father, they're giving them that tenant farm down in the valley?"

"What?" said his grandfather. He looked through the contract. "My, so they are! And that allowance?"

"Morwen has always wanted to try sheep farming," said Beregar.

"What will you do, son?" said his father.

"I'll keep going in the Army, I expect, with frequent trips home—?"

"How do you feel about sheep?" said his grandfather. "My father's father was a sheep farmer, so maybe it's in the blood?"

"I like to eat them," said Beregar. "Mmm. Roast lamb. I'm happy enough if Morwen wants to farm them?"

His father started to laugh, somewhat hysterically. "I still cannot quite believe this."

"Nor I," said his grandfather, putting his hand to his head. "I would not have expected this, back when I challenged that guard at the Rath Din—"

"Well, shall I sign?" said Beregar.

"You're that eager?" said his father.

"It's more that I have realised that this was foreordained when we were children," said Beregar. "I could not even think of another woman, ever. She's the only one for me."

"That is *exactly* what your mother and I were afraid about—" said his father "—although it has all turned out well in the end."

Beregar picked up the pen and signed both copies. "Grandpa. Will you witness?"

His grandfather signed in his neat, fussy hand and then promptly burst into tears.

"There, there, Dad," said his father, patting his grandfather on the back.

Beregar arrived back at the barracks, feeling a little odd. He had not changed at all, but everything had changed. He was not quite sure how he was going to explain it to his regiment. He put down his gear in the barracks. Olthamir and Tolthion rushed up and saluted him. "Happy birthday, sir!"

"Thank you, men," said Beregar.

"How were the birthday celebrations, sir?" said Olthamir.

"A little unexpected," said Beregar, blushing.

"Oooh!" said Tolthion. "By the Valar! Did you finally kiss a woman?"

"Actually rather more than that. I got engaged," said Beregar. "She asked me after the first course of my birthday lunch—"

Olthamir and Tolthion stared at him. "You ... what? She ... *who*? She ... what? Who *is* this woman?"

"I told you it was complicated," said Beregar. "I grew up just down the hill from a noble family. The father of that family owed a life-debt to my grandfather, and educated us all with his own children."

"Uh oh," said Tolthion. "I'm betting he had a daughter not too far from your age?"

Beregar blushed again. "He has lots of children. But yes, she's a little over a year older than me."

Olthamir's brow creased with thought. "Who lives in Emyrn Arnen, is noble and has lots of—*by the Valar*, Lieutenant!"

"So yes, anyway—I'm engaged to, ah, Lady Morwen of Emyrn Arnen," confessed Beregar. "I've been in love with her since I was five years old, and she with me for the same amount of time, so it is probably just as well."

"Is *that* who's been writing you all the letters?" said Tolthion.

"Yes," said Beregar.

"How did her Da take it? Was he furious and did he disown her?" said Olthamir eagerly.

"No, he shook my hand and said he was looking forward to welcoming me to the family in three years time," said Beregar. "The Prince is a most decent person. My grandfather became emotional."

"Hah! Our Prince gave you that horse you were so cagey about!" said Tolthion. "I did wonder—"

"That was Morwen; but with her parents' approval, I now discover," said Beregar.

"She's not the Princess with the daggers, is she, sir?" said Olthamir, with concern.

"No, that's Idis. She's about six years older than Morwen and unmarried. She's totally hilarious, and I like her, but I wouldn't wed her if she asked. She apparently terrified a Haradric criminal last week, after he called her a 'loose Gondorim whore' in his own language. She responded in his tongue that she was not a whore because she would not sleep with him for any money, and that she was not entirely from Gondor, because her mother was the Wraithslayer of Rohan—"

Tolthion burst out laughing. "Classic! *Classic!* She sounds like a *caution!* This Lady Morwen doesn't get up to larks like that?"

"Morwen is sweetest and sanest of any of them, apart from the obsession with pink, but I'm prepared to overlook pink dresses, given her other virtues," said Beregar. "Poor Idie is *actually* very nice, but she tends to terrify any men she approaches, because of the daggers, her height, and her prodigious level of knowledge of all manner of things. Morwen's clever too, but she doesn't let it leak everywhere in the same way, and she's extremely kind and helpful."

"So you *have* actually kissed a girl before?" said Olthamir.

"Erm. Only one, but yes, repeatedly, from quite a young age, to the extent that we actually got forbidden from being alone in a room together—"

Tolthion slapped his thigh. "Ha! *Ha!* That explains *that!*"

"Well done, sir, and happy birthday," said Olthamir. "Let's go have a drink!"