

DESPERATION

◀ *Quest of Fire* ▶

BRETT ARMSTRONG



*This book is dedicated to the glory of God Who brings light into
the most desperate and dark hours of our loves and without
Whom there would be no words worth writing.*

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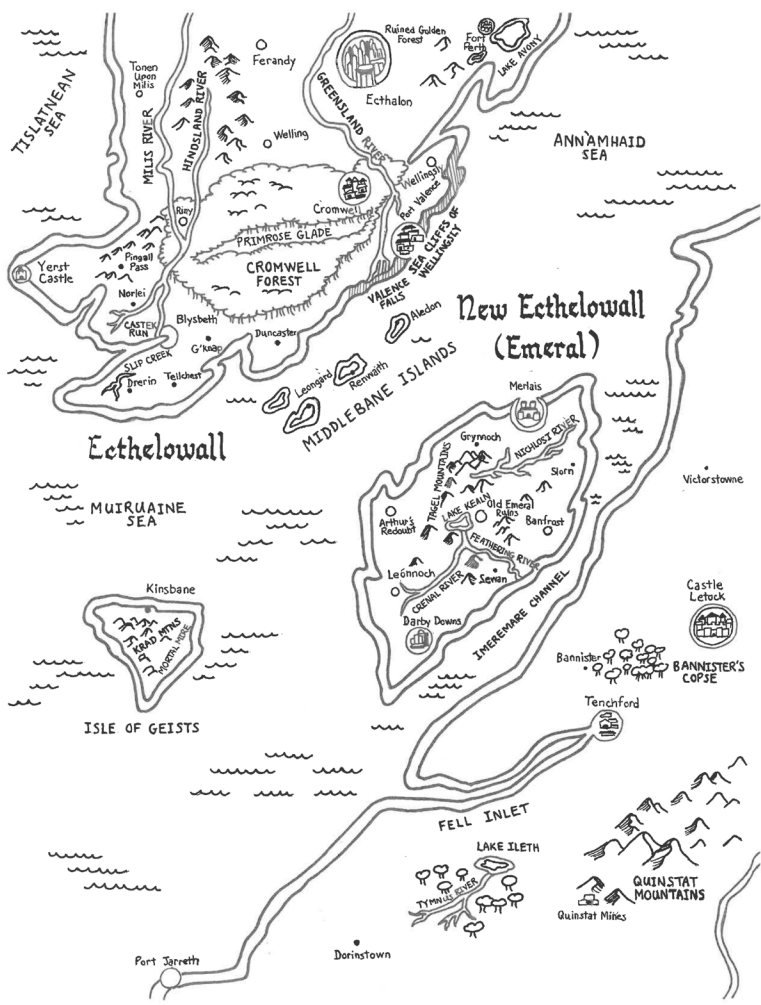
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Gladiol 24, 1606 Middle Era

Hands extended, Thomas felt the soft leaves brush against his fingers. Drops of dew rolled down onto his exposed forearm, providing refreshing nips of coolness. Summer was here, and he'd been out in the sweltering heat longer than he liked. His childhood home on the Isle of Fens was far cooler, even at this time of year.

Even so, he knew better than to complain. After living five of his sixteen years with Baron Cillian Fenwrest, he learned to keep things to himself. Not that the baron, his uncle, was a tyrant. In fact, he was one of the more amenable, approachable nobles of Ecthelowall. However, no one would ever dare accuse him of being “soft.” During the war with the Rehalcy to the south in which he'd lost an eye, he'd almost bled to death from his wounds. Even so, he fought an overwhelming force into full retreat. That route had earned him a place of honor on the council of nobles and been the pivotal victory of the war.

So, when it came to whining about being too hot or too

cold, Thomas kept quiet. And while suffocating under the weight of his boredom while guarding a noble's retinue, he kept doubly quiet.

His uncle was not here, but word would get to him. Worse, it would get to others. Baron Sornfold would be happy to see Thomas castigated yet again.

"Keep a weather eye out," a weaselly voice called out from at his back. "Never know where the Monarch's forces might strike. They're everywhere, you know?"

Thomas ground his teeth. "Of course, we're being vigilant as hawks." Above all, he repressed all complaints about Gregor. His younger cousin was his uncle's heir and well aware of it. Chubby, opinionated, and not half as smart as he imagined. It was true that Maldes Ilyron, the self-proclaimed Monarch of Ecthelowall, had spies all over the main island. Here in the southern marches, loyalty to the Viceroy was nigh universal, and there was no shortage of fervor to restore his rule. Gregor's concerns were just another of his naïve fantasies about battle. Of course, Thomas couldn't say any of this aloud.

"We should pick up the pace," Gregor added. "Her Mistress, Delia, need not suffer the heat of your sloth."

Rolling his eyes, Thomas spurred his horse on faster. "How did Uncle Cillian's son of all people become so pretentious?" he muttered under his breath.

A snicker at his left told him Sir Hurstwell heard his comment. The old man, and captain of Baron Fenwrest's guard, was the closest thing to a friend Thomas had out here. At times he felt like a well-armored nanny as much as a mentor.

Wiping sweat from his brow, Thomas cleared soaked strands of his chestnut brown hair from his eyes and glanced back. Gregor appeared none the wiser. The little oaf swatted at mosquitoes and wasn't attending to the reins of his horse. Usually, Thomas would warn him about it, but right now,

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Gregor was too insufferable. Mistress Delia was his betrothed, and he acted especially pompous around her.

Delia, eldest daughter of Baron Sornfold, was eighteen with long, curly amber tresses, smooth skin bearing the faintest traces of freckles on each cheek. Her eyes were blue like the Hindsland River and intelligent. Her name meant sun-kissed, and there wasn't a man or boy in all Ecthelowall who didn't envy the sun. She was all but oblivious to Gregor. In fairness, she wasn't much interested in anyone after her first fiancé Mark, Gregor's older brother, died from a gangrenous wound received when the War of Restoration started. Twenty-one, handsome, courtly, and her true love. Whatever annoyance Gregor induced, Mark had in equal amounts awed Thomas. Mark was his hero and acted every bit like a brother instead of a cousin.

It was perhaps forgivable if Gregor presumed the respect and rewards due his brother were from title instead of virtue. He was Baron Fenwrest's youngest child; how could he understand the world's hard things? Or the need to earn respect?

There was a flicker of movement that drew Thomas's attention. Another girl, seated beside Delia, had crossed her arms over her chest. It was hard to tell from this distance, but he thought her brow arched, and a question burned in her emerald eyes.

His cheeks flushed red, and he turned back around. Mia was Thomas's age and Delia's younger sister. A thorn in Thomas's side, no doubt she was gossiping about him gawking at her sister, which wasn't true. Beautiful as she was—Thomas wasn't that disrespectful. Especially not to Mark's Delia. But from their childhood up, whenever the spiteful redhead could, she got him into trouble. Her life's mission seemed to be his misery.

“How much farther till we reach Yerst Castle?” Thomas tried not to sound flustered.

His efforts were in vain. On the rumble of a chuckle, Sir Hurstwell replied, “We’ve barely left Cromwell. It’ll be two, maybe three days at this pace. Naught to fear, though, Master Thomas. I will protect you from Mistress Mia.”

“She’s not a mistress,” Thomas corrected him. Everyone seemed to ignore her impertinent behavior, excusing its implicit rebellion against the social order. If Thomas had to follow it and wait hand and foot on his boor cousin, then Mia wasn’t getting a pass from him.

“Well, she’s certainly not a man,” Hurstwell countered. “Surely you’ve noticed.”

“What do you mean by—”

A dozen yards ahead, a figure burst out of the tree line at a sprint. The next instant Hurstwell was after him. Two seconds after, Thomas flanked him.

The man ran perpendicular to travelers. It took them nearly running him down for him to even notice their pursuit.

As soon as they had him flanked, he threw up his hands. “Please, I only want to warn my family! Please, sir. They’re just a little farther in Duncaster.”

“And that blood on you, that’s yours alone?” Hurstwell asked, sounding as though he doubted it very much.

Thomas looked the stranger over as the man dithered answering. Hurstwell’s question was fair. The man’s garments were streaked with a rich crimson. They looked like the undergarments of a soldier over a common woodsman.

“It’s not mine. Not most of it anyway,” the man grew quiet, holding out his shirt from his body to examine it. There was a change as he did. His thready calm broke and his eyes widened as tremors seized him. “You have to run! They’re coming!” he

shouted and tried to sneak from between Thomas and Hurstwell.

Hurstwell snagged the man by the scruff of his collar. “We’ll be needing more cause for flight in the free country of Ecthelowall than that, I’m afraid.”

“But this isn’t free land anymore,” the man protested. “The Monarch’s forces are coming!”

“The Monarch’s armies were pushed back north of the Greenstrand River’s bend,” Hurstwell pointed out, shooting Thomas a look that said they were dealing with a lunatic.

Shaking his head, the terrified man held up his hands. “Please, sirs, I want no trouble. I am a deserter, I admit that. But if you’d seen what I had, you’d have run too.”

“And what exactly did you see?”

“An unbelievable force. An army three times as large as the Monarch’s levies attacked us by surprise at dawn. In the Primrose Glade, north of here. I was lucky to survive.”

Hurstwell spat. “When the Viceroy’s armies arrive—”

The deserter stopped struggling to free himself. A sound, which began as a laugh but perished as a moan, escaped his mouth. “You don’t understand. They’re gone. All of them. There is no army left. There is no Viceroy. We’re all going to die.”

Thomas blinked and looked over at Sir Hurstwell, aghast. The War of Restoration turned in their favor not two months earlier with the arrival of Albaron’s soldiers in the north. This man had to be exaggerating. What mortal army of the Lowlands could assemble and devastate the strong alliance the Viceroy had here in the Cromwell March?

“You have to make him bring us there!” Mia demanded, her eyes fierce. “Delia, tell them! Father was encamped there.”

“Yes, but it’s a battle. We could get hurt!” Gregor protested,

looking panicked by the very idea of seeing the battle, much less drawing into its enclosure.

“Oh, grow a spine,” Mia sniped.

“Mia!” Her sister chided. Delia’s eyes fell to the ground. “I do not think that’s wise, sister. Whether this man is lying or not, a place such as that is precisely where Father would not want us to be. It’s better for us to stay the course to Yerst Castle.” Her voice sounded hollowed out, as though she’d already resigned herself to the loss.

It tore at Thomas. He wasn’t Mark, but he knew better. If he cared at all for Delia and his memories of Mark, he knew what he had to do. “I’ll go.”

Beside him, Sir Hurstwell grunted and shot him a wary glance. Thomas took it as a challenge. “I can do it. I’ll take this deserter back to the field, and we’ll sort this out. The rest of you can double back to Port Valence to be safe, and I’ll join you later with news of what’s happened.”

Mia’s lips pursed as if she wanted to say something, but Sir Hurstwell cut her off. “Too dangerous for you, young one. I’m in charge of your care as well. We all head to Valence and that’s the whole of it.”

“No!” Mia screeched and jumped down from the carriage, landing with surprising grace. “If you won’t take us there, I’m going alone.” With that, she bunched up the jade mounds of her dress and took off into the trees.

Hurstwell uttered a growl and pointed to Thomas. “Well, there you have it. Get after her. I’ll guard the others and proceed on to Port Valence.” He addressed the deserter, “It’s a high crime to flee from battle without orders.”

The man looked stricken. “Please! No! I’ll die—we’ll all die!”

“How far north and east are the battle lines?”

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“Haven’t you been listening? There are no lines. It was a massacre!”

“How far?” Hurstwell barked, his voice firm and fast as a boulder.

“Three, maybe four miles if you cut across the forest,” the man used his sleeve to wipe tears from his eyes.

“Good. Now, get. If I see you again, I’ll be forced to exact the due penalty from you,” Hurstwell swore pointedly.

The man mumbled a thanks and then took off running. Thomas watched him until Sir Hurstwell whistled. The large man pointed to the tree line. “What are you waiting for? Get Mistress Mia.”