



Thomas had been through the forests of Cromwell March many times. He knew how to walk and run through the dense confluence of trees with speed and stealth. His footfalls, even at a sprint, were the padded tread of the hunter. Perhaps his experiences on hunts made him over-sensitive, causing him to wince at each faint crunch and rustle he created. But the impossibly loud thrashing of Mia ... well, the forest itself deserved better than that. Not to mention, if the deserter spoke true, her crashing through the undergrowth was incredibly dangerous.

He gave Mia about a quarter mile to come to her senses. She didn't. Running ahead, he came around in front of her. Mia gave a startled yelp of surprise.

"A grizzly bear at a full run in a potter's shop makes less noise than you," Thomas grumbled.

Leveling a stare that could melt through steel, Mia demanded, "Get out of my way. I'm going to see my father."

"Baron Sornfold charged Hurstwell and me with keeping you safe. If he and the others in the Viceroy's army moved

camp this near our route, it's not because he intends for you to be there," Thomas challenged, moving to the side as Mia tried to skirt around him.

"Ugh, you're such a pest. You and Hurstwell are like trained dogs, following every passing whim a nobleman stumbles upon!"

"No, just the ones that make sense. You know, keeping maniacs like you from getting hurt," Thomas countered, letting his voice grow as loud and forceful as hers.

There was a softening of Mia's scornful expression. After a moment, she said, "You're just looking out for me then?"

Thomas nodded. "Of course. I want to know the truth about this battle, but your safety comes first. It's my duty to get you to Yerst Castle without harm."

Mia drifted closer to him. At first, he thought it was to dodge past him, but she didn't take her eyes off his. Without any warning, she brushed her fingertips along the length of his arm so gently it sent shivers through him. Her eyelashes seemed to flutter, and her lips slightly parted. If he had to characterize it and the way she angled her bodice towards him, he came to an absurd conclusion.

"Are you trying to flirt with me right now?" he asked, completely blunt and more than a little confused.

Her hand dropped and she huffed. "Isn't it obvious? Or are you too dense to understand that either?"

He pointed at her. "That's more of what I was expecting. How dumb do you think I am that I'd just fall for you suddenly acting as though you tolerate me, much less have feelings for me?"

"Well, I see the way you drool over my sister. It wasn't such a leap to think you're that dopey. She clearly manipulates you all the time. I thought I'd give it a shot."

Thomas laughed. “Maybe, but your sister is beautiful and thoughtful and gracious.”

“And I’m not?” She replied, hands on her hips, her eyes filled with a challenge.

“I—uh,” he struggled. How could he compare the two of them? Though as he stared at Mia, the ferocity in her countenance did make her seem older, more mature. The more he looked, the more he could see through the angry façade to the concern and caring for her father. Cast in that light, she suddenly looked very different. Not stubborn or pigheaded, but passionate, loyal, determined. “I suppose you are beautiful in your own ways,” he commented before he could catch himself.

Her cheeks flushed red. “What did you say?”

“Nothing,” he said quickly and then added, “We’re still at least two and a half miles from the battlefield. If you stick with me, I can help you tread quieter so we get there in one piece.”

Mia cocked her head to the side, sending her ruddy curls sliding over her shoulder. “Are you serious? You’re going to help now?”

“Yes, but only if we move fast,” he asserted. “We’ll need to see what’s happened and get back to the group before they worry I’ve lost you.”

She stared at him, thoughtfulness knitting her brows. “Okay,” she finally said. “Lead the way, and I’ll try to move more quietly.”



MAKING it through the forest took longer than Thomas wanted. Mia, true to her word, did try. Even so, he had to go much slower and take a more winding path to ensure they weren’t found. Whether the deserter told the truth or not,

approaching a battlefield unexpected wasn't something to do loudly.

"There's a clearing just ahead," he informed her as he made his way up a slope of a creek bed. "From what our deserter friend told us, it makes the most sense for a battle—"

He stopped, every muscle going stiff as if caught in a trance.

"Most sense for what?" Mia pressed. She was about two yards behind him and hadn't yet struggled up the bank. Thomas kept silent and waited for her.

"Hello? Finish your sentence," she said and fumbled a bit on the slick stones.

He reached down, grabbed her wrist, and hauled her the rest of the way up. She jerked back her hand and looked ready to say something undoubtedly scathing when she caught sight of what he'd seen. Mia gasped. Most of the line of trees suddenly ended in shattered smoking stumps. Out in the glade beyond stretched bodies of fallen soldiers. Hundreds. Maybe thousands. Fires still smoldered in some spots and destroyed cannons and downed horses only added to the cataclysmic feel of the landscape.

As the shock at the desolation gave way to disgust and anxiety, Thomas scanned the field for signs of the victors. Judging from the proliferation of the Viceroy's standard and colors, the deserter had been right. This had been a slaughter.

It struck Thomas after nearly a minute of surveying the carnage that he'd heard no sounds from Mia. Facing her, he was surprised to find her not weeping hysterically or boiling with anger. Instead, she took it all in with what could best be described as solemnity.

Thomas understood the look. He'd worn it himself years before. It was that of one who, in a single moment, lost everything dear to them in the Lowlands.