



“Stay here and wait for me.” Thomas made it three steps before feeling a tug at his arm.

“No,” Gregor insisted. “I’m coming with you!”

There wasn’t time for Thomas to stay and fight over the matter. Rather than waste the energy, he muttered, “Keep up.” He dashed past the protesting guards to the gatehouse as the first of those outside the castle walls began streaming inside.

Thomas wove through the press of people, pushing toward the tents with the ill.

*Why in the Lowlands would Steward Kilkern send Mia here knowing the castle would soon be under siege?*

The thought turned over and over in his head without resolution. It made no sense. Especially given the steward’s otherwise imminently keen insights and planning.

“Slow up,” Gregor mewled, farther behind than before.

“You insisted on coming.” Thomas slowed. A minute later they were at the outskirts of the medical camp. A pair of soldiers strode to intercept them.

“You there. By order of the steward, no one is allowed to

come near the sick. There is an imminent attack by Monarchist armies. You must turn back and shelter within the castle walls.”

“What nonsense,” Gregor complained. “We were just here earlier. Why would visiting the ill comport with sheltering in the castle?”

“They don’t want anyone bringing the ill into the castle for safety,” Thomas surmised, grimly. It was pragmatic and tragic in one.

The soldier nodded, “My orders are simply to turn back any who comes. Especially whiney children.” He shot Gregor a pointed a look.

Before Gregor could snap back at the guard, Thomas gripped his shoulder and spoke up, “We respect your orders, but I’m the Captain of Baroness Sornfold’s guard, and I was told the steward had sent her to this camp. I need to bring her safely into the castle before the siege begins.”

The guard nodded as if finally recognizing Thomas and Gregor. “Of course. The steward left explicit instructions regarding you both. He said to make sure you two in particular are not allowed into the camp and to escort you back to the main gates personally.”

Gregor shot Thomas a startled look. “What? Why in the Lowlands would he do that?”

Thomas kept silent and appraised the obstructive guard coolly. Something was very wrong. But what?

The soldier drew his sword, as did his compatriot. “Get to walking Ecthels,” he ordered.

Thomas backed up a few steps, pushing Gregor behind him. “There’s been a serious misunderstanding,” he said, keeping his voice calm and level. His eyes roved between each sword pointing at them.

“The misunderstanding is you Ecthels bringing your war into

Albaron's lands and then acting like you rule over us. We didn't join your War of Restoration to help your Viceroy—we joined it to make sure your Monarch never attempts to take our lands.

"So, I will say it once more. Leave or I don't care who you are—I will cut you down where you stand!"

Thomas worked his tongue over his teeth, struggling against the urge to brandish his sword and strike down the soldier. Thomas knew the High King wouldn't want him to attack. This soldier was short-sighted but not evil. An obstacle but not an enemy. At least not openly. Taking another step back, Thomas raised his hands placatively. "Very well. We can see ourselves back to the gate."

"Thomas?" Gregor protested after they had walked out of ear shot for the soldiers. "If we don't get the Baroness out of there, she could be captured or worse!"

"I know that, Gregor," Thomas snapped before reining in his frustration. "I know. We have to make a circuitous approach. Come around from another side and sneak into the camp."

"Another side? All the approaches have guards posted," Gregor protested, but he followed Thomas as he veered away from the gates and ducked behind a particularly thick patch of bushes and briars.

"Not the eastern face of the camp," Thomas corrected.

"Well, of course, because the hill was excavated there to expand the camp. It's a sheer drop, almost a cliff!"

Grumbling as he went, Thomas retorted, "If you have a better way to warn *the Baroness* in time to deliver her from Monarch Ilyron's forces, then I'd love to hear it."

At the edge of the steep embankment, rocks clattered off the rough, freshly hewn stone overlooking the encampment. Gregor looked up at Thomas, incredulous. A bit of his old

whiney tone strangled his words. “Literally anything is a better idea than plummeting to our deaths here.”

“Not helping,” Thomas chided. As he evaluated the situation with the cliff side, he could see Gregor’s point. It would be risky to scale the cliff on a good day without rushing. This was not a good day.

Another blast from the horn reverberated through the air.

Good day or not, he would scale a cliff face a hundred times the size of this and ride a thousand leagues to help Mia. One day, he would have to let her go so she could take her place among the regal and magnificent. Until that day, he needed her. They had been through so much together. They had helped each other survive what most would only ever dream of in their worst nightmares. Dangerous or not, he was climbing down this cliff.

Gnawing on his lip, Thomas dithered only a moment longer. “Stay here.” He swung his legs over the edge. Lowering himself, he probed for his first foothold.

“You’re mad if you think I’m going to wait around here to watch you fall to your death,” Gregor snapped, his voice cracking. An instant later, he was alongside Thomas, grimacing as tiny shards of stone skittered to the bottom. Gregor wasn’t exaggerating the possible outcome of this.

Thomas immediately realized gripping the stony facing wasn’t going to be as simple as he expected. The places for him to hold were shallow and required a tight grip. He glanced at Gregor. The boy’s knuckles were white. Each time he changed the positioning of his feet, he had to support his full weight briefly with only his arms as his foot probed for a place of refuge.

They moved slowly, too slowly.

Sometimes sideways for several feet before finding a reasonable way down. If the growing aches and uncertainties of

their descent were as potent for Thomas as they were for Gregor, then he wasn't sure how his younger cousin was managing at all.

Twenty-five feet to go, and faint tremors raced the length of his arms. Checking on Gregor again his eyes widened with horror. Gregor's whole body was shaking, and Thomas could see his hands were slipping. If he lost all hold and fell from this height, he'd be dead. Even if he survived the initial impact, he would have to be taken to a physician, which meant coming in closer contact with the Devastation.

Thomas had to do something. Immediately. But what? He was barely holding on himself. Why had he been such a fool and risked this? It was one thing to put himself in danger, but how had he accepted such a thing for Gregor? He was just a boy. No, more than that, he was an heir to a lineage that was the rallying banner of the Restoration. Yes, the Restoration was to depose Ilyron and restore Ecthelion as Viceroy, but even Thomas knew it was temporary. There was a reason Ilyron's bid for the monarch's throne had resonated with so many. The greatness of the past was a temptation, and Ecthelion would inevitably abdicate. Gregor was all that remained, the last unsevered tether to a past to which many longed to return.

A strangled cry escaped Gregor's lips as his grip faltered.