



Within the walls of the castle, it was a normal temperate day in the month of Blomsen. Late-spring was treating them kindly even if events were not. Thomas could see from the ease with which everyone walked and buoyant banter within the market that word had not yet spread of the impending attack. Any minute a horn would blow to share that warning both to those bustling about the castle courtyard and in the city below, shattering the tranquility.

Kilkern's Redoubt was perched on the top of Ourst Hills. Wrapped around by the outer curtain wall, the city foundations straddled each mountainside of the valley. Twin sister keeps on each ridgetop boasted commanding views of the whole region. There would be no evacuations needed, but women, children, and the elderly would have to prepare for potential fires and seek refuge in the inner curtain walls and keeps. Every able-bodied man was required by Albaron law to report for service in the defense. Under normal circumstances, that would be a formidable force to call up. However, the Devastation had already greatly diminished those capable of

mounting the defense, and many more were away on other battlefields of the war.

Thomas only had a few minutes to do what he had to do before he would be missed at the muster call. He had to get to Mia before the siege started because he knew tomorrow's sunrise would find this castle reduced to rubble and those within its walls dead or captives of the Monarch.

Telling himself over and over it wasn't selfish, Thomas half believed it. Truth was, Mia and Gregor needed to escape for the good of Ecthelowall. But for that good or not, he couldn't let them be swept away.

Passing by the western keep guards with a salute, he made his way through the expansive entry area to the grounds at the back of the structure. A terraced garden grew on the slopes. Often, he would find her tending to the little patch of Emerald thistle growing here, because it reminded her of her home. A home she could not return to unless this war was won.

There was no sign of Mia.

"Perhaps she's in her quarters?" Gregor offered, breaking the tense silence.

She wasn't the type to stay inside the keep all day, but if she was about the grounds, surely he would've spotted her by now. Nodding, Thomas started toward her chambers, struggling to move as fast as possible without appearing too hurried. But it was fruitless. Even the maidens assigned to attend to her were absent.

*Where can she be?*

Perhaps sensing Thomas's tension as they stalked back outside, Gregor spoke up again, "You know, I've made lots of progress in swordsmanship practice since you last watched."

"Really?" Thomas replied, almost thoughtlessly, as he wove around the busied interior of the castle's grounds.

“Captain Luach says if I keep this up, I could be ready to join the War of Restoration before summer solstice.”

Thomas came to a complete halt and whirled around to face Gregor. “You’re not going to fight in this war!”

Gregor’s eyes widened. He looked so much like a whipped pup, it snuffed out the blaze of Thomas’s anger before it could fully catch.

He sighed. His tone had been harsh. Taking his younger cousin by the shoulders, he tried again in a gentler manner. “We’ve been over this. Your role in all this is to stay safe. Stand at the ready to help guide the country to a better future when the war ends and the time to rebuild Ecthelowall begins.”

*What am I saying? If I don’t find Mia and get them both on horses riding away from here, they won’t live to see the week’s end, let alone that sort of future.*

Walking again, Thomas didn’t bother to look back as Gregor launched into a familiar argument about his place in things. Letting the other teen grouse, Thomas stalked up to another guard, who had apparently gotten notice of what was coming because he was assisting with rolling a defensive cannon in place. “Sergeant, may I have a word?”

The older man sneered down his long nose and wagged his bristly grey mustache. “What is it, boy? I have things to be about!”

The soldier’s dim brown eyes widened as he seemed to finally focus. “Oh, it’s you, Sir Fenwrest. And Your Honor,” he amended, straightening to give an Albaron salute of sorts.

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Gregor replied with some of the old airs of authority he could put on that still irked Thomas.

Gritting his teeth, Thomas cut in before Gregor could speak again. “I know about the impending attack. I’m looking for Baroness Sornfold. But I can’t find her or her attendants.”

The old Sergeant’s bushy brows raised in concern as

though he felt the frustration radiating off Thomas. “I dare say that is because I saw her and one of her attendants heading down to the death tents—er—the field hospital.”

“What?” Thomas demanded, not properly masking his concern. How was he supposed to? She could fall ill with the Devastation, and then he and Ecthelowall would lose her. Of the two, he felt certain he would feel the loss so much more deeply.

“It’s not proper for a Lady such as herself to visit so somber a venue.” Gregor stepped in. Somehow, he escaped the petulance he’d indulged in a moment before, transforming with ease into a budding diplomat. “Who approved such a thing?”

“Why, I heard Steward Kilkern himself encourage her to visit the tents. I believe one of her attendants fell ill this morning and was carried down there.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Back to your duties.” Gregor returned the Albaron salute.

Thomas didn’t bother with the gesture. He was already dashing back down to the lower courtyard, intending to storm the tents and find Mia.

“Thomas, what about the attack? As captain of the Baroness’s guard, you have to join the muster with the others in defense of the castle.” Gregor struggled to keep up with Thomas.

Ignoring him, Thomas moved faster. There wasn’t time to argue with Gregor over what constituted the proper manner of safeguarding Mia.

With a surprising burst of speed, Gregor dashed ahead and cut off Thomas’s path. Gregor was getting faster, but Thomas easily whirled around him and kept going.

“You know you keep acting like this, and they’re going to see through your ‘noble bodyguard act’ and force you two to break up.”

Skidding to a halt, Thomas faced Gregor, who stood huffing about ten feet back. He glowered at him. They were out in the open, but no one was in the immediate vicinity to have heard. Blabbing like that could ruin things for him and Mia.

“The least you could do after I’ve done more than my share to keep the secret is hear me out once in a great while!” Gregor spat in accusation.

The biting comment sobered Thomas. Hard as it was to admit, Gregor was actually the one being mature and level-headed at the moment. Thomas drew in a deep breath. “You’re right. But time is tight. I can’t chance something happening to Mia.”

Gregor seemed to chew on that for a bit. “We’re in public—it’s Baroness Sornfold.”

“Right. Baroness Sornfold. Thank you.” Thomas didn’t have to feign gratitude.

“Well, lead on.”

They were just a few dozen yards from the gate back to the hospital tents when it occurred to him that the steward must have known he was sending Mia into danger.

A loud blast from a ram’s horn sounded from the top of the keep, reverberating through the hillsides. He was out of time.