

ATTENTION READER

What follows is an excerpt of the book Summer's Revenge by Emma K. C. Couette releasing to the public on July 21st, 2021. You are receiving the first two chapters of the book ahead of time for free as an introduction to the world and characters of Summer's Revenge.

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Thank you for your understanding.

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ALSO BY EMMA K. C. COUETTE

The Guild Trilogy

Silent Night

Sacred Ruse

Solemn Vow (Fall 2021)

The Fidalian Chronicles

Summer's Revenge

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Appalachia: app-a-lay-shia	(Capital city of Winter)
Arevia: a -ree-vee-a	(Isan and Sky's mother)
Arkenier: are-ken-yay	(King of Summer)
Asmund: az-mund	(eldest son of Lord Arrath)
Fidal: fee-dal	(creator of Fidalia)
Fidalia: fee-dal-ee-a	(the name of the realm)
Icaria: eye-sair-ee-a	(Princess of Winter)
Isanfier: eyes-an-fire	(Prince of Summer)
Kallen: kal-lin	(King Frost's general)
Sancia: san-see-a	(Goddess of Summer)
Snowdon: snow-done	(Prince of Winter)
Skiansy: sky-an-zee	(Princess of Summer)
Widonia: wid-own-ee-a	(Capital city of Summer)
Wylla: will-a	(Goddess of Winter)



FIDALIA

THE DIVIDED LANDS OF THE SUMMER AND WINTER KINGDOMS

Created By Rachael Ward

*To my younger sister, Megan,
who helped this story come to life and tolerated all my endless rants
about this book for eight years.*

You're the real MVP, kid.

Once, an old God had a dream
Of a land that would be forever at peace.
This God's name was Fidal and
He created the realm of Fidalia.

Fidalia was wondrous
And its people were beings of grace and light.
Yet, Fidal was unhappy.
They were not like him and he was still alone.

From far across the winds,
A new Goddess heard the yearnings of his heart.
"Why are you sad?" she asked.
"My name is Madge and I would like to help you."

Fidal told her his woes
And together they rebuilt his broken heart.
They used magic and life
To create four goddesses to join Fidal.

Soon after, Madge vanished,
But Fidal would never forget her blessing:
Four daughters to rule with,
Four souls with which to share his grand creation.

Wylla was the eldest.
She had snow-white hair and brilliant blue eyes.
Winter was her domain,
Goddess of death, travellers, sleep, rivers, and the moon.

Audria came second.
She had hair like fire and eyes of orange.
Autumn was her refuge,
Goddess of fire, forests, war, darkness, and love.

Sancia was the third,
Skin of rich earth and hair like raven feathers.
Summer was her palace,
Goddess of the sun, the sea, animals, plants, and hunting.

Stella was the youngest.
She had wispy, brown hair and eyes like fresh grass.
Spring was her festival,
Goddess of children, art, fertility, healing, and light.

...

Those who live a good life
Will join Fidal and his daughters when they pass
To live among the stars.

Those who don't pass his test
Find their soul in a tree, a silent watcher
Until the end of time

Part One: Sorrow

"May our sorrow of today be our momentum for tomorrow."

—Anon

1

RAGE AND REMINISCENCE

My arm burned and the armour was covered in dents, but I didn't care. I couldn't stop. I had to persevere, had to keep pushing back the emotions clamouring for attention. I focused on swinging Ember over and over again, like my life depended on it, like my sanity depended on it. There was more truth in the latter.

In the back of my mind, I knew the illusion wouldn't last. I knew reality was destined to return eventually, but still I persisted. It was the only way to gain even a touch of relief.

My sword stuck in the armour on the next swing. I cursed and yanked at the blade, but she wouldn't budge.

"Come on," I urged.

I had to keep going. I had to.

I pulled on her with all my might. "Come on!"

Panic set in as I felt reality returning. Emotions poked at the back of my mind.

Stop.

“Get out! Get out!” I screamed at my sword, but that was it. It was too late. The walls I had built around me came crashing down, burying me in rubble. Tears streamed down my face and I sank to the ground in defeat, leaving my sword, *Ember*, where she hung.

I let my emotions go, knowing that was the only way to truly free myself. I cried for what once was and what might have been. I cried until there was nothing left, until my heart was but an empty husk, yearning for a hope it would not receive.

When my eyes finally dried, I dragged myself out of the bottomless pit of sorrow and began sifting through the rubble of my thoughts.

Twelve years ago...

I couldn't finish the thought, as if thinking the words would make it true.

Say it, Isan. Denying it won't change a thing.

I took a deep breath. “Twelve years ago today, my parents died,” I whispered to the courtyard. My heart contracted and my eyes teared up again.

Every year, I expected the pain to fade and every year, it was like a fresh blow to the chest.

“Well, would you look at this,” a voice crowed. “Our mighty Crown Prince, bawling like a baby.”

I turned to see Asmund Arrath entering the courtyard. He hadn't changed a bit in appearance since I'd last seen him. He wore the same tailored military garb, and the same arrogance was etched into his deep brown face.

My eyes narrowed in his direction as I got to my feet.

What's he doing here?

Uncle said Lord Arrath's children weren't due for another week.

“What's the matter, Isanfier,” Asmund went on, “did Skiansy beat you in a duel? Or did you lose to the dummy?”

I wiped my eyes with the back of my shirt sleeve. "Neither," I replied. "Today is the anniversary of my parents' death. You should show some respect."

Asmund snorted. "Real men don't cry, Isanfier. It's been well over a decade; pull yourself together."

Fidal give me strength.

That was why I hated him. Every encounter was a lecture, as if I was fourteen years younger than him instead of four.

"You of all people should understand," I told him. "How long has your mother been gone, Asmund? A couple months? And here you are telling me how to grieve? At least you still have a father."

At least he had proper memories of his mother. The memories I had of my parents were hazy and fading more with each passing year. Soon, they would be gone forever.

Sancia save me then.

"My mother was always a frail woman," Asmund replied. "It was only a matter of time. I spent years grieving her absence before that sickness took her."

"At least you have closure," I retorted. "My sister and I still don't know who killed our parents or why. Twelve years have passed and Summer is no closer to the truth."

Asmund shook his head, his long dreadlocks swinging. "You still don't believe it was magic, do you?"

"How can I? They were found with their throats slit, Asmund, and magic doesn't wield swords; men do."

"Men can wield magic," he reminded me. "The sorcerers could make it look like a sword too."

I let out an exasperated breath. He was just like the rest of them, always talking me down. The only one who believed me was Sky, but she had even less influence than I did.

"Forget about the murder weapon," I went on, "the murderer is more important."

He held up a dark hand. "Yes, yes I know. It was Winter, of course."

Am I that predictable?

"Think about it," I urged him. "Who in Summer could possibly want them dead? They were cherished by the people. Winter is the only kingdom cruel enough. Generations of Summer royalty have fallen to their hands. What more proof do you need?"

"Isan, please, I've heard it all before."

"I could be next, Asmund," I replied. "You won't be laughing then. They've had plenty of time to plan in the past twelve years. We should attack now, before it's too late. We—"

"Enough," he bellowed. "This is madness and you are in danger of falling to it. Be grateful Fidalia has been so quiet. Don't go looking for trouble where there is none." He turned to go. "I will pray for your family tonight, those in mourning and those already gone."

He left me there in the courtyard, dismissing me and my ideas as if I were some servant rather than his future king. His promise of a prayer was just to keep me from calling him out on his disrespect.

It didn't matter anyway; I knew I was right. I knew Winter was out there, lurking beyond our borders, waiting for the right moment to strike. I wouldn't let my guard down. I wouldn't let another person die because of them. I wouldn't let another person become like me.

Cold and angry and afraid.

• • •

My footsteps echoed in the quiet of the castle, the only sound that could be heard. As usual, I resisted the urge to talk to myself, if only to create the illusion that the place wasn't so empty. The castle had bustled with life before my parents' death, but balls, feasts, and any type of social gathering died with them.

Noblemen rarely came to visit anymore. Our staff had reduced after the tragedy too. Many rooms sat neglected in their absence and entire wings of the castle stood forgotten.

Our remaining servants would've had some excitement with the arrival of Lord Arrath's progeny. The guest wing needed some work to be presentable again, though I suppose, being from a military city, Asmund and his siblings would be used to a bit of dust.

I rounded a corner and entered a once-ornate section of the hall. White columns lined both walls, spaced evenly apart and stretched into arches that spanned across the ceiling to meet their sisters on the other side. Painted ivy snaked up and around them. Nestled between each pillar was a painting, though some of the spaces were empty, awaiting future masterpieces.

A part of me wanted to turn back, didn't want to face this, but today was a day of mourning and this hall was a memory of days long past. Some of the artwork dated back centuries and the canvases were as faded as the scenes and people they depicted. Balls, banquets, and coronations were forever preserved in the vibrant colours on the left side of the hall. On the right, the faces of my ancestors stared back at me.

My dead ancestors. Winter killed them all save for King Henri, but he had been even frailer than the late Lady Violette Arrath. Magic, disease, and all the other dangers in Fidalia could be the end of you, but in my family, it was Winter you had to watch out for. There was a whole kingdom full of people who wanted you dead.

How much safer Fidalia would be if Winter was wiped off the face of it.

I shoved that thought aside and regarded my family. Some smiled, as if they were glad I was there, and others glared at me, as if they could hear my thoughts and were wondering why I wasn't doing anything to avenge them. All of them were brown eyed, some with intricate braids and others letting their dark locks hang free. Each one of them upheld the trademarks of Summer people: brown eyes, dark skin, and hair that was never cut short for anything.

When I reached my parents' portraits, hanging side by side, I averted my gaze for a moment. I wanted to walk past, but this day belonged to them and I wasn't selfish enough to deny them that.

I looked up to meet my mother's smiling face and tears welled up in my eyes. She was so beautiful. Her skin was a rich, earthen brown and her hair cascaded around her face like an ebony waterfall. The painter had done such an impeccable job.

I brushed my hand across her face, trying to ignore the difference in our skin tones. "I wish I could've known you longer," I whispered to her. "I miss you."

I wiped away a tear that escaped.

You have to be strong for them.

Even so, I looked away from my mother. My father's portrait hung to her left. He smiled at me too and I couldn't help but smile back. I could see Sky in his facial features. No one would ever doubt they were related. I could imagine them standing side by side, laughing together. My most prominent memory of my father was his infectious, booming laughter.

My chest tightened at the thought.

I would never hear his laugh again and someday I would forget the sound.

I choked back my tears and closed my eyes.

"Blessed Wylla," I whispered to the realm, "watch over my parents on this day and every day. Audria, send them my love. Sancia, be with them always. Stella, help me to heal and to be more forgiving. Fidal, I am grateful for the life you have given me and continue to sustain. Fidalia forever."

I opened my eyes. My parents' death day was the only day I prayed to all four goddesses and Fidal with any measure of seriousness. It wasn't that I openly renounced them other times, but that day was the only one that truly mattered.

Summer was Sancia's domain, but I prayed to Audria, the goddess of love and Stella the goddess of healing. I tried never to utter Wylla's name, the patron goddess of Winter, but she was the goddess of death, so who else would listen? It seemed like a fitting match for Winter.

My mourning over, I moved to the end of the hall to where the latest portrait of Sky and I hung. It had been done two months prior, upon our sixteenth birthday. Sky's features mirrored the rest of the portraits, unlike mine. My dark brown hair was cut short, barely over my ears. The portrait depicted me with medium skin, like Sky, and the typical Summer brown eyes, but it couldn't be further from the truth. I was paler than a sheet and my eyes were a piercing, unnatural blue.

I was told it was some childhood disease that caused my strange complexion, but I couldn't help but feel like an imposter and an outcast, especially when walking the hall of my ancestors. I never felt like I belonged, but that I was a mistake that might one day ruin everything.

"Isan?" a voice called out to me, echoing throughout my end of the castle. It was a voice I would recognize anywhere.

"Sky?"

She didn't return my call, but I heard footsteps a few moments later and she rounded the corner in front of me. My twin looked resplendent in a deep green dress that matched the emeralds in her tiara. Her long, brown hair was braided over her shoulder, gold stars woven between the strands. Her darker skin seemed to glow in the presence of such finery.

"What's the occasion?" I asked. "You actually look like a princess."

She pulled at her skirt. "Oh, this? I visited Mother and Father this morning and I... I thought they'd like to see me in something nice." She gave me a small smile, but I could tell it was forced. Her eyes were rimmed with red and she looked a bit dishevelled behind all her splendour. Today was hard for her too, but she still tried to keep up appearances.

My coat, on the other hand, was covered in dirt and my hair was slicked back with sweat. I wouldn't doubt there to be tears tracks visible down my face as well. I looked more like Sky's lowly servant than her brother and heir to the kingdom. She always made

me look even more out of place. It was the one thing that stood between us.

"How are you faring?" she asked me.

I shrugged. "Well enough. I had a run-in with Asmund earlier. He and his siblings have arrived early."

She scowled. "Lovely, and what did he have to say?"

"Nothing pleasant."

"I would expect nothing less," she sighed. "I suppose *he* was invited to the Council."

I raised an eyebrow. "Council?"

She nodded. "That's why I came to find you. I was having tea with Aunt Mag when she mentioned Uncle had called a Council. I thought it odd, since you hadn't mentioned one, so I investigated myself. They're holding one as we speak."

I frowned. "Without me?"

"It would seem so. Shall we go see what they wished to keep from you?" She gave me a mischievous grin.

I smiled. "Indeed we shall."

• • •

We heard the voices before the study even came into view. They were clamouring over each other, arguing about something.

"What in Fidalia is going on in there?" Sky wondered aloud, a bit out of breath from our rush over there. She didn't wear corseted dresses often enough to get used to them.

"Let's find out," I replied.

We approached on light feet, following a pattern we'd memorized as children to avoid squeaky floorboards, and took up places on either side of the door. Then I nudged the door into the room about an inch. Any further and the hinges would creak, a fact Sky and I had learned the hard way. We couldn't see much, but we could hear everything.

“Do you believe Lord Byron’s claims that Widonia is in danger?” one of the knights was saying.

“How could I not?” Uncle replied. “Byron has no reason to lie to me and he has been a trusted nobleman for years. Besides, I would be a fool to assume Widonia is safe based solely on its status as the capital city. We are not without our limits.”

“Perhaps not, your Majesty,” another knight said, “but is a war with the Wyllans the best course of action?”

I raised an eyebrow.

War?

After all this time, they were finally considering it. I wished we hadn’t missed the first part of the conversation. I wanted to know what prompted the action.

“I am more concerned about whether or not it is the *right* course of action, Sir Warmund,” Uncle replied. “The Wyllans have done many things to earn our ire. This time, it will not be tolerated. It cannot.”

“So we’re going to sacrifice the lives of our people because you are too proud to show the Wyllans mercy?”

It was Asmund who had spoken this time and I marvelled at the audacity of his words.

“Mercy must first be deserved,” Uncle replied. “Until then, we must defend our honour and our people.”

“I don’t think—”

“Enough,” Uncle snapped. “You are here because your father is not. You are not yet a Lord, Asmund son of Arrath. Do not push my patience or you will never be one.”

I took a step back at that. Asmund had been the favoured heir of Skar for over a decade. His brother Arran couldn’t fill their father’s shoes and as for Aramina... She was too wild. Besides, Uncle would never choose a female when there was a perfectly suitable male in the picture.

“Master Asmund may be out of line, your Majesty,” Sir Warmund went on, “but his heart is in the right place. A war with the Wyllans would threaten our way of life.”

“So you’d rather ignore the threat and have our people cut down one by one by Frost’s assassins?” I could hear the frustration in Uncle’s voice and began to count down the seconds before it boiled over.

It was never long.

One.

“No, Sire, I’m not saying that, but I do think we have to be more...tactful with this decision. A lot hangs in the balance.”

Nine.

“Sir Warmund is right, your Majesty. This could be a ploy to get us to attack. We need to bide our time and—”

“Bide our time?” Uncle bellowed, as I reached fifteen seconds, his anger finally snapping. “King Frost had my sister murdered twelve years ago! I will not watch another Sancian be slaughtered by those Wyllan fiends!”

I sucked in a breath.

What?

The hallway seemed to expand with my lungs, as if the castle itself was waiting to see my reaction.

I turned to Sky. “Did he just...”

She only nodded, her face a pale semblance of the rich colour it usually bore.

He’d been lying to us all this time. He’d known the truth all along. I had been cheated and betrayed all in the name of keeping a non-existent peace.

The hatred between Summer and Winter traced back as far as any of our records went. Our ancient feud wouldn’t end until one of us lay dead and desolate, until one of us destroyed the other.

2

Agree to Disagree

My body moved forward of its own volition as I swung the door open the rest of the way and stepped into the room.

All eyes turned from Uncle to me and then Sky, as she followed me in.

“Isanfier?” Uncle said. “Is something wrong?”

“Is something wrong?” I echoed, shaking my head. “You excluded me from a Council meeting and then admitted to lying to Sky and I about our parents’ death since we were children. Why? Why would you keep us from the truth and let me believe my theories were delusional?”

Uncle dragged a hand down his face, pulling at his scar as he realized Sky and I had heard everything. “The truth has little bearing, Isanfier,” he replied. “It can’t change what happened. It can’t bring them back.”

“It could’ve brought us some peace, Uncle. It could’ve kept you from breaking our trust.”

Uncle hung his head. "I am sorry for that, but I did what I thought was best. Tragedy is hard for everyone and I didn't think putting a face to it would ease your pain."

I sighed. I didn't want to accept his apology, but to refuse him in front of the Council would be seen as the highest disrespect, so I nodded and said, "I pray Fidal will help me find forgiveness."

A silence fell in the room then and I looked around the table at the knights, searching their faces for any sign of guilt. None of them had been surprised at Uncle's words, so they must've known as well.

Asmund was likely the only ignorant one among them, but he wouldn't apologize for mocking my claims, even though I had been right all along.

I looked back to Uncle. "I have one more question, if you will allow it."

He nodded his head, as if to say, *go on*.

"Why now? If you knew the truth from the moment they were found dead, why have you waited until now to declare war? It's been twelve years."

"I could hardly lead this kingdom into a war right after taking the throne, Isanfier. It would not honour your parents' memory to throw their kingdom into chaos any more than their deaths already had. Actions like these take time and we were *trying* to show the Wyllans mercy, but that opportunity has passed. They have revoked it."

"Pardon my intrusion," Sky said, "but what exactly have the Wyllans done this time?"

It was almost unheard of for her to attend a Council, but I was glad she was there to stand by me.

Uncle let out a breath, relieved to be moving on, and said, "Why don't you two have a seat and I'll tell the tale." He waved to my empty seat at his left and then looked to Asmund. "Master Asmund, if you would?"

"Of course, your Majesty," Asmund said, getting to his feet and offering Sky his empty chair.

I could sense Sky's irritation, but she took the seat anyway, taking a moment to straighten her skirts and figure out where to put her hands. Asmund hovered behind us and it was enough to make my skin crawl.

As soon as we pulled our chairs in, Uncle spoke again.

"This morning, I received a letter from Lord Byron telling us of an attack Mensden suffered a few nights ago. A group of Winter knights had snuck into the city and made an attempt on his life. They were unsuccessful, but several of Byron's guards were lost during the attack. The assailants escaped and Lord Byron fears they will head here next." He paused, as if gauging our reactions, and then continued. "There are men out searching for the culprits now and when they are found, they will await a fate much worse than death."

Sky's eyes widened. "Do you speak of torture?"

Uncle waved a hand. "They may receive that in time, but not from me. No, they will be sent back to *their* king to tell him that—because of them—Summer has declared war on Winter."

There it was again. That word.

War.

It had so few letters, but they each spoke volumes. They carried such an incredible weight. The Council was right to be wary, but for now, I was on Uncle's side. Winter had to pay for its crimes.

Uncle looked around the table, at all his knights, at Asmund, at Sky and me. He levelled us all with his even gaze, a gaze that told us not to be afraid, a gaze that told us this was our right, a gaze that promised our victory.

"All of you will have a part to play in this," he said. "It will not be an easy task and I do not ask this of you lightly. I ask because I know it can be done."

The men nodded, and I supposed they had all come to a silent agreement that war was the only way, come what may.

"Sir Kent will stay behind and oversee the kingdom's affairs in my absence," Uncle went on, nodding at his Captain of the Guard

seated opposite him, “and each Lord shall govern their own section of the army.” He looked to Asmund. “Your father will be eager to see some action.”

Asmund nodded, but said nothing.

“What would you have *me* do?” I asked Uncle, eager to see some action myself.

“You and your sister will stay here,” he replied, “safe and sound in the castle.”

I bristled, but didn’t let the emotion reach my face.

“You are the future of this kingdom,” Uncle continued. “If I should perish... We will need the two of you alive. If I do not return, Isanfier, you will be King. You have my word.”

His words echoed in my head.

If I do not return, you will be King.

I always knew being King was my destiny, but somehow it seemed like a distant, almost impossible event. It was easy to ignore. However, Uncle would die eventually—as everyone must—and with war looming on the horizon, the transition could be much sooner than I’d anticipated. I was lucky to have him between me and the throne at all. In decades past, he would’ve served as advisor to me and nothing more. I would’ve made all the decisions from a young age. He had saved me from that burden, but one day it would come to pass.

Could I handle the responsibility?

I didn’t know if I was ready, but if my people needed me, I would not stand idly by.

I nodded, recognizing Uncle’s vow. “I will rule honourably with Sancia at my side.”

“I pray you do,” he replied. The matter settled, Uncle turned back to his men. “We leave in a fortnight.”

Everyone’s eyebrows rose at that, but none of them dared to say a word against it, not even Asmund.

Sky however, had other ideas. “What if we don’t find the Winter assassins by then?” she asked.

Uncle's eyes reflected his outrage at her audacity. "You dare doubt our men?"

Sky, realizing her mistake, backtracked quickly. "No I... I simply wondered what would happen if that was the case. We can hardly send them to Winter with the declaration if we don't have them in our custody."

"If that was the case," Uncle replied, his words slicing the air, "we would leave anyway. Winter does not need to know we are coming. I intend to give them one last kindness, but they can easily do without. Sancia knows they would not extend the same courtesy."

Sky nodded. "I suppose."

The discussion moved on to more details of the war then: preparations, plans, provisions. Sky and I stayed silent. I barely listened to what was being said and I doubt she did either. It didn't concern us. We were to stay in the castle, like caged animals. We were to do as we were told.

What a foolish notion.

Uncle couldn't keep us there. We had the right to fight for our kingdom, the right to avenge our parents. I could not stand by any longer. It was time to prove myself, to act, to do something worthwhile. I understood Uncle's sentiment. Sky and I were the future, but what future would we and Summer have if we lost this war? I'd rather die defending my kingdom than live to rule a desolate place. How long would my rule even last if Winter won?

No, I could not sit back and watch this conflict unfold, but now was not the time to protest. Sky and I would have to discuss it first and we'd have to wait for the right time to approach Uncle. I did not wish to quarrel with him in front of the entire Council again, not to mention Asmund. It would have to wait. I would have to be patient.

At long last, the conversation came to a close.

"Tomorrow, in the town square, I will announce our declaration of war to the people," Uncle said. "Sir Kent, see to it that the word

gets out. I want everyone present at this gathering. That is all for now. You may go."

I stood up, almost knocking my chair over in my haste, and was halfway out the door when Uncle called out, "Prince Isanfier, a word please."

I groaned and turned around.

The Council filed out and Sky shut the door behind them, giving me an encouraging smile as she did so.

"Yes?" I asked Uncle, taking a few steps closer to him.

His deep brown eyes stared into me. "I truly am sorry for trying to keep you away from this meeting, Isanfier, but it was your day of mourning and I did not wish to burden you further."

I nodded. It was a decent excuse, but it felt empty somehow.

"I would like you and Sky to accompany me to the gathering as well," he went on. "We need to stand united against our enemy and I ask that you refrain from wearing your usual black attire."

I frowned. "Why?"

"It leaves a bad impression, especially considering who we are going to war against."

I sighed.

He was right, but I didn't like it.

"And another thing," he said. "As you can see, Lord Arrath's children have arrived. It is poor timing, but that can't be helped. I want you to ensure their stay is comfortable, all three of them. I would also like you to report any unusual behaviour."

I scrunched my face. "Unusual?"

"I want to choose Lord Arrath's successor before we head off for war, in case neither of us survive it. I need to know if any of his children slip up during their time here. I want to know if..." He looked around the room, as if afraid someone might hear us. "If any of them practise magic."

I snorted. "Those three? Magic? They're too rigid for it."

"You'd be surprised," Uncle replied, leaning back in his chair. "It can show up in the most unexpected places. Their mother had it."

“What?”

“Lady Violette Arrath. She had magic. She could make flowers grow out of nothing.” He shuddered. “She swore not to use her ‘gift’ after I banned the use of magic, but if her children inherited her powers... They might not choose the same path.”

I nodded. I thought the war on magic was madness and unjust, but I would do what he wished. It may gain me some favour with him. “Of course, Uncle, I will see to their stay and their...activities.”

Uncle smiled. “You are dismissed then. I will see you at dinner.”

Sky was waiting for me in the hall, as was Asmund. He was kissing her clasped hand when I joined them and I coughed pointedly.

It was no secret that Asmund coveted my sister; that was one of the many reasons I hated him. He didn’t want her because of who she was. He wanted her because of *what* she was. The princess. Royal blood. Power. If he couldn’t be Lord of Arrath, he would settle for Prince Consort. If Sky were ever to take the throne, Asmund would become the second most powerful person in Summer.

If it was my choice, I would choose anyone but Asmund to marry my sister. Sadly, only the monarch had that privilege. I would have to hope Uncle chose Asmund as heir to Skar. He could either be Lord of Skar or Prince Consort of Summer. He could not be both.

Asmund let go of Sky’s hand and she let it fall. “It is good to see you again, your Highness,” he said.

I snorted.

Your Highness. He never uses such frivolity with me.

Sky forced a smile. “I trust you have been keeping well?”

“Most well,” he replied. “I was knighted this past spring.”

“Good work,” I chimed in. “It took you long enough.”

He turned to me with a scowl. “You are just jealous.”

I shrugged. “I don’t need a title to tell me I can fight.”

Sky cut in before we could start a scene. "Where are Arran and Aramina?" She was always the peacemaker when we were children.

"They are resting in our rooms," Asmund replied. "They'll be joining us for dinner."

Marvellous.

"I am sure it will be a pleasant evening," Sky said, "but I must be off now."

I suppressed a smile; I knew she had nowhere to be.

Asmund gave her a half-bow, his hair nearly scraping the marble floor. "It was a pleasure."

"I will see you after lunch?" I asked her. "At the usual place?"

She nodded. "Don't be late."

I grinned. "I wouldn't dare."

She flashed me a smile and walked off with a swirl of green skirts, leaving me with Asmund.

How generous.

"That smile was different," Asmund remarked as Sky disappeared around a corner.

I turned to him. "What?"

"The smile she gave you was different than the one I received."

"Mine was genuine, you mean."

His eyes narrowed in distaste.

"Face it, Asmund," I told him. "You are not well liked in this castle. You may be the favoured Son of Skar, but you lack friends here. Neither Sky nor I will make it easy for you to pursue her, so perhaps you should focus more on winning the King over. It would be in your best interest."

He scowled at me. "I will do as I see fit."

I shrugged. "Do as you must, but I have warned you. Remember that."

Remember to tread with care.

I may have been a weak man in his eyes, but I saw my emotions as strength. I would protect my sister at whatever the cost. She meant too much to me to watch her marry a man she despised.

• • •

I looked up at the sun's position in the sky, directly above my head. The light beat down on me but I shrugged off the heat.

Any minute now.

The courtyard stood empty and silent, save for me and the quiet *shing, shing* as I eased my sword in and out of her sheath, growing more impatient by the second.

Where is she?

Sky had admonished me for lateness and here she was, standing me up.

Then something whizzed over my head and I heard the unmistakable *thwack* as an arrowhead struck the stone wall beyond me.

I turned on my heel in the grass and there she was, crouched in the archway of the courtyard wall, her bow, *Tempest*, aimed at my head.

I put a hand to my heart. "Fidal's breath, Sky. Don't you have anything better to do with your time than giving me grey hairs?"

She grinned and hopped down from the ledge. "Nonsense."

She had changed her outfit. Gone was the gown and the tiara; taking their place was a white tunic, brown leather pants, and high brown boots. A shortsword hung on the belt around her waist and a quiver of arrows was slung over her shoulder.

Sky took to wearing pants whenever she could and I didn't blame her. She'd thrown one of her dresses at me once, and the thing nearly knocked me over, it was so heavy.

"I'm trying to keep your senses sharp," she went on, "and you clearly need more work." She poked me in the forehead with the end of her bow.

I rolled my eyes. "At least I wasn't late."

"Late? My dear Isanfier, I have been watching you for ten minutes."

She turned away from me as I gaped at her, and walked over to the other side of the courtyard to retrieve her arrow.

It was harrowing to think Uncle had once tried to keep her from this. He'd nearly fainted ten years ago when she asked him if she could learn weaponry with me. Uncle subscribed to the traditional idea that women were too delicate to wield weapons, but Sky had thrown such a fit he had eventually relented. She was only allowed the use of sword and bow, though, but that suited her just fine. Sky was born to be an archer; her arrow never missed its mark.

Sky and I had received our training from Sir Warmund himself with the aid of a few castle guards. He had taught us about weapon lore as well, how they were considered extensions of our wills. It was he who had told us of an ancient magic that bound man to weapon, so that weapon would serve them all their life.

The ritual was simple, but powerful and Sky and I had both undergone it. I did it for *Ember* and Sky for *Tempest*. The five letters of *Ember's* name were etched into the fuller of the sword, signifying to the entire realm that she was mine.

Our claimed weapons were our greatest secret. No doubt the ceremony would be considered part of the forbidden magic everyone was so afraid of those days. I found it ridiculous. How much more dangerous was magic than a sword? Both could kill; both could protect. People chose to take up arms; they did not choose to be born with magic.

"So," Sky said, interrupting my thoughts as she joined me again. "What do you wish to practise today?"

"Why don't we start with some simple sparring?"

It was her turn to roll her eyes. "Sparring is never simple with you."

I crossed my arms. "I think you owe it to me after your attempt on my life."

"I think next time I won't aim to miss," she replied, but then she shrugged off her quiver and placed it and *Tempest* against the wall before walking over to stand in front of me.

We nodded in acknowledgment of one another and drew our swords together, mine ringing softly as I pulled it out of its sheath.

We waited for the space of three breaths and then charged.

Ember sliced down at her and she blocked, our swords clashing with a shriek of metal on metal.

Her sword reached for me and I dodged, spinning away at the last second.

I knocked her off balance with that move, but she recovered before I could use it to my advantage.

We dodged, ducked, and parried as we fought to gain the upper hand, trading moves back and forth for several minutes before I saw a hole in her defences.

I sent *Ember* under her arm and poked her in the ribs.

"Ow!" she gasped, jumping back.

"I win," I said with a grin, "and you are now dead."

She sighed and sheathed her sword. "I only lost because you are a master."

I nodded. It was true. From the moment I first picked up a sword, it was clear that was my destiny.

Every challenger fell before me. Even Asmund, trained in soldiering as he was, had never beaten me in a duel, though our blades had crossed several times over the years. It was one of his greatest annoyances and I took great pride in it.

"I could beat someone else," Sky went on. "I have before. Besides, in a real battle, I'd have an arrow through your throat before you could even raise *Ember*."

She walked over to her discarded bow and quiver then, picking up *Tempest* and grabbing a single arrow before heading over to the far side of the courtyard.

I trailed after her and we stopped directly across from the wooden targets.

In moments, she had the bow nocked and drawn, and with an exhale of breath, she loosed the arrow. It flew one hundred paces across the courtyard and hit the target dead centre.

She followed it up with two others in quick succession before relaxing her stance and holding *Tempest* out to me. "Your turn, little brother."

I refused her offer and crossed my arms instead. "We both know I was born first."

She frowned. "Were you?"

"Of course I was," I retorted. "Why else would I be the Crown Prince? In answer to your challenge, no thank you. I'll keep to the sword, wouldn't want to steal your glory."

"Steal my glory?" she scoffed. "We both know I'm the best archer in Widonia."

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you?"

She shook her head. "You're so..."

"What?"

"Nothing," she said, but I could tell she was trying hard to hide a smile. "Let's not argue. There was enough of that this morning at the Council." She headed over to the targets to retrieve her arrows and I fell into step beside her.

"What do you think of it all?"

"It's a foolish move," she replied. "Uncle is acting before he thinks. The others could sense it, but they don't carry enough weight to stop him."

"So, you don't want us to go to war?"

She turned back to look at me. "Does anyone ever want to go to war, Isan? It's a dirty and dangerous business. We may not be at peace with Winter, but Summer is quiet, thriving. That will change when the war starts. It will take decades to restore our way of life. I'm not certain I am ready to give that up."

"It doesn't matter if you are," I replied. "Uncle isn't going to back out now and risk being called a coward. He is too proud to admit his mistakes, even if the entire realm can see them."

"I suppose you are right." She leaned over and yanked her arrow out of the threadbare target. Sky had overworked it in the month since it had been set up, as she always did.

"The war is inevitable," I told her, "and I have decided I am not going to stand idly by while everyone else fights in it. I was hoping you'd feel the same."

She dropped the arrow. "Have you lost your mind?"

"We have to fight, Sky."

"No, we have to think this through." She fixed me in her earthen gaze. Always so steady and so...stubborn.

"I have," I protested. "I *have* thought about it and I can't live like this anymore. Uncle tells us our every move. People treat me like I'm stupid and you like you're nothing more than a prize to be won. We're forbidden from leaving Widonia, even. This city is more of a prison than a home."

I took a deep breath.

"We have to fight back, Sky. We have to show Asmund and the others our worth. What better way to win our freedom than fighting for our people? Isn't this the reason we've been training? Why spend our days practising the bow and sword if we refuse to use our skills to fight for what we believe in? What's our purpose, Sky, if not that?" I threw my hands out.

"It's not that simple, Isan," she insisted. "Uncle would never allow it. The entire royal family cannot fight. What happens if we all perish? Summer would be in chaos without a ruler. Are you prepared to wed and leave a pregnant wife behind to ensure the future of Summer? Because that might be the price."

I winced. "Sky, I don't think—"

"Exactly," she replied, crossing her arms.

"We have to at least try. This could be our only chance to..." I stopped myself before I could reveal the real reason I wanted to go.

She narrowed her eyes. "Our only chance to what?"

"Nothing," I said with immediate regret.

"Nothing?" she repeated. "It has to be something. What were you going to say?"

"Let it go, Sky."

"I don't think I will. Tell me or I'll start rumours that you're ready to pick your future Queen." Her brown eyes were as fierce and unforgiving as a mighty oak tree, refusing to break under the pressure of a passing wind.

I scowled at her, my blue eyes like steel. "Fine," I relented. "This could be our only chance to avenge our parents."

"Oh, Isan," she sighed. "Not this again. I've told you a hundred times; let it go."

"But I can't," I exclaimed, throwing my arms out in exasperation. "I've tried. I swear I've tried, but it's useless. The anger is like a fire burning me alive. I might explode if I continue to sit here and let their killer run free. I have to do something, especially now that my suspicions have been confirmed. The Winter King had our parents killed, Sky. Does that mean nothing to you?" My eyes burned into hers, but she didn't flinch.

"Isan, making him 'pay' isn't going to bring our parents back. Nothing good comes from revenge; it only leads to more death."

"He *deserves* to die."

She put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "I know what you're going through, Isan. I understand the hatred, the pain. Some days I want nothing more than to march into Winter and bring them to their knees for what they stole from me, but deep down I know it will change nothing. It will help nothing. We have to move on. By killing them, we are only sinking to their level. We have to stay strong."

I shook off her hand and stepped back. "By letting them win? I will not stand by and watch that unfold."

"Isan, stop this," she pleaded. "You're letting anger cloud your judgment."

"And you're letting cowardice cloud yours," I snapped.

She reeled back as if I'd slapped her and I instantly regretted my words. A physical blow might have hurt us less.

For a moment, neither of us spoke and it was difficult to face each other again, but we did. Her eyes were full of sadness.

"Isan," she said softly.

"Yes?"

"Please don't do this."

I looked at my feet again and she sucked in a breath.

"I have to do this, Sky," I told her. "I won't rest until I have my vengeance."

"So be it," she replied. "I will see you at dinner."

I looked up in time to see her walking away, her steps rushed, *Tempest* clenched tightly in her hand. Her arrow still lay at my feet.

I watched her go in silence. I didn't call her back or try to stop her, knowing it was futile. Neither one of us would change our minds, not easily anyway. It hurt to see her walk away, but I knew she hadn't abandoned me, not completely. Our bond was much stronger than that, but even still, the peace between us had shattered, like a vase struck by one of her arrows.

EMMA K. C. COUETTE

Thank you so much for reading this excerpt! I hope you enjoyed this small taste of Summer's Revenge and that you enjoy the rest of the book when you receive it in July.

Emma K. C. Couette

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