

ATTENTION READER

What follows is an excerpt of the book *Winter's Wrath* by Emma K. C. Couette releasing to the public on March 20th, 2024. You are receiving the first five chapters of the book ahead of time for free as sneak peek of what's to come.

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ALSO BY EMMA K. C. COUETTE

The Guild Trilogy

Silent Night
Sacred Ruse
Solemn Vow
Assassins Below

The Fidalian Chronicles

Summer's Revenge
Winter's Wrath

Contents

ALSO BY EMMA K. C. COUETTE	2
AUTHOR'S NOTE	6
PRONUNCIATION GUIDE.....	7
Part One: Shadows.....	12
1.....	13
2.....	21
3.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
4.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
5.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
6.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
7.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
8.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
9.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
10.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
11.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
12.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
13.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
14.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
15.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
16.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
17.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Part Two: Ashes	Error! Bookmark not defined.
18.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

WINTER'S WRATH

19..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
20..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
21..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
22..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
23..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
24..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
25..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
26..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
27..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
28..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
29..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
30..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
31..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
32..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
33..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
Part Three: Rage..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
34..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
35..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
36..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
37..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
38..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
39..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
40..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
41..... Error! Bookmark not defined.
42..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

43..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

44..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

45..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

46..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

EPILOGUE **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

THE NOBLE FAMILIES OF SUMMER **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

THE FIVE TYPES OF PEOPLE IN FIDALIA..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

AUTHOR'S NOTE **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR..... 38

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For the best reading experience, please reference the below two guides at the back of the book for information that is not discussed in depth by characters in the story.

The Noble Families of Summer: page 398

Magic in Fidalia: page 400

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

- Appalachia:** app-a-lay-shia (Capital City of Winter)
Areevia: a -ree-vee-a (Isan and Sky's mother)
Arkenier: are-ken-yay (Former King of Summer)
Asmund: az-mund (Son of Lord Arrath)
Cahir: ca-hear (Member of the Shadow Watch)
Fidal: fee-dal (Creator of the realm)
Fidalia: fee-dal-ee-a (The name of the realm)
Gwyneth: gwin-eth (Daughter of Lord Norwell)
Icaria: eye-sair-ee-a (Princess of Winter)
Isanfier: eyes-an-fire (Prince of Summer)
Kainda: cane-da (Daughter of Lord Norwell)
Kallen: kal-lin (King Frost's general)
Sancia: san-see-a (Patron Goddess of Summer)
Soleia: sol-ay-ah (Daughter of Lord Lachlan)
Snowdon: snow-done (Prince of Winter)
Skiansy: sky-an-zee (Princess of Summer)
Tamise: ta-mees (City in Winter)
Weylyn: -way-lin (Son of Lord Norwell)
Widonia: wid-own-ee-a (Capital City of Summer)
Wylla: will-a (Patron Goddess of Winter)



Map Created By Rachael Ward

*To my granny, who has only asked me a few times if this book is
ready yet (and who will be very upset I called her granny in a
published book)*

*It's finally here! And no, I don't know when book three will be done,
but I promise you'll be the first to know*

Once, an old God had a fear
Of a land that would be forever at war.
This God's name was Fidal,
And he created the Curse of Fidalia.

Fidalia was wondrous
But its people were falling from grace and light.
A war had torn them apart,
And Fidal could no longer trust their motives.

The kingdoms stood divided,
The Edgewood now a sentinel between them,
And Fidal could not allow
Another battle to ruin the balance.

And so, Fidal made a Curse,
A prophecy to guide new generations,
An omen of disaster,
A chance to change the fate of Fidalia.

When the realm is unbalanced,
Four champions will be born to correct it:
A set of twins for each land,
Destined to be each other's end or the realm's.

Two shall survive the battle,
If they follow the destiny of the stars,
And the actions required
To win the war will save the realm from itself.

But if they ignore their fate,
They will doom Fidalia to destruction.
All four of them shall perish,
And the entire realm will follow in their wake.

Part One: Shadows

“Someone I loved one gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.”

—Mary Oliver

1

Wounds of War

A chill settled into my bones as I rode my horse through the gates of Widonia, the Summer army a sea at my back and Sky a rock at my side to anchor me to the world. Even after five weeks of leading them, I still found it hard to call them my men. I was detached from the idea that I was the one in charge now, that the Summer throne was empty and I would have to take up the crown much sooner than anticipated.

Darkenier's fallen sword was a hollow weight on my right hip, one I would be glad to shed.

The sun shone down on us, glinting off our armour as we rode through the streets towards the castle, a complete reversal of our departure months ago. The people cheered for us, waving flags and flowers, and I reminded myself to smile. This was the moment I had longed for, the moment I had dreamed of, but victory is usually bittersweet.

People seldom worry about the right things. I had been so terrified of never seeing Widonia again when we left that I hadn't

WINTER'S WRATH

stopped to consider what it would be like to return without certain people at our side.

I wondered how the citizens of Widonia were reacting to Darkenier's absence, how long before the cheers would dissolve into restless whispers.

The King is dead. Is the Prince ready to lead us? How could they let him die?

Something brushed my arm, and I jumped in the saddle, half turning in that direction.

Sky gave me a look and dropped her hand, her brown eyes boring into me. "Smile, Isan," she said. "We're home. We survived. We won."

I took a deep breath and nodded. "I know, I just...never imagined this moment."

"You should enjoy it while it lasts. These next few weeks won't be so pleasant." She gave me one last smile and then turned to give the people an even wider one.

She was so good at projecting happiness, at giving people something to hope for, but then again, it was much easier to spread joy when you weren't pretending to possess it. Even so, I took another deep breath and followed her example.

The people would be receiving enough bad news in the next couple days; the least I could do was put on a brave face and lead them through it.

The knights dispersed into the city as we went, some towards the barracks and others towards home. By the time we reached the castle, there was only Sky, Asmund, Silas, me, and an entourage of ten knights. When our armies had parted ways north of the Edgewood, Asmund had chosen not to go home to Skar with his father, saying he was needed more in Widonia. I wasn't sure if that was strictly true, but I didn't blame him. Lord Arrath had been frosty with him ever since his defiance in Appalachia.

Sir Kent met us at the castle doors, and I was beyond grateful to see him. He would know how to proceed, what meetings had to be held and such, though I did wonder how he would react to the King's demise.

I dismounted my horse, and the others followed my lead. We walked fourteen strong up the stairs to join Kent, who ushered us inside.

"Your Highnesses," Kent exclaimed, "I am so glad to see you both! It has been agony awaiting your return. The people have been growing restless." He beamed at us, but there was a sadness in his eyes. "Where is the King?"

My heart constricted, and I could only shake my head.

His eyes widened, and his voice was almost impossible to hear when he said, "He is dead?"

Asmund brushed past me. "Worse than dead, Captain. He betrayed us all. There is quite a story to tell, but we are all weary. Perhaps we could hold a dinner later to discuss the ramifications?"

Kent blinked at Asmund, some of the colour draining from his face. "He...what?"

"He betrayed us," Asmund repeated. "Disappeared in the battle when we needed him most, beheaded King Frost, and then made an attempt on Isanfier's life. Should I go on?"

Kent looked like he might be sick, and I stepped in to save him from more suffering. It would not be easy for him to accept the truth about Darkenier; they had been close friends for as long as I could remember.

"That's enough, Asmund," I said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We can give Sir Kent the details later. We know full well it is a lot to take in."

Asmund took a step back, and Kent nodded. "Some time to process would be best, I think. You sound genuine, but...Fidal's breath, I do not possess the words to address the matter. We will discuss it in depth at dinner tonight, but for now, you all should rest. I know the journey is long."

WINTER'S WRATH

I gave him a smile. "Thank you, Sir Kent. I'm sorry we return with such somber news."

He sighed. "It is not your fault, Your Highness. Conflict brings out the worst in people. It's in struggle that you see who they really are, that their true colours are brought to light. War seldom hides the truth."

I nodded. That was the understatement of a lifetime.

The silence following his words was broken by an exclamation to our right. "Isan? Sky? Oh, Sancia's breath, you made it home!"

Sky and I turned to see Aunt Mag barreling toward us, as fast as she could while still maintaining her ladylike demeanor. We were in motion almost instantly, rushing to meet her. The three of us collided, and I finally felt at home again as she squeezed us against her and whispered a prayer of thanks to the stars.

"Oh, I was so worried," Aunt Mag gasped. "I've been beside myself since the moment you left, but I never lost faith. I knew the two of you would do everything you could."

"We promised you we'd come back, didn't we?" I asked as she finally let us go.

She smiled at me, tears running down her weathered face. "That you did, child. That you did."

She and Sky took a moment to wipe their eyes, and I turned back to the waiting men in the foyer. "You are relieved from duty for now, men. Go see your families and rest up. We shall reconvene at dusk for dinner and discuss the details of our journey. Sancia be with you."

The men took their leave one by one until only Silas remained.

I looked at him. "Afraid to go home?"

He smiled. "Not at all, son. I want to make sure you have no further need of me before I head out."

I smiled back. "I'm sure your wisdom would be welcomed at all hours, but your family needs you more right now. Your wife must miss you terribly."

“As I do her. Thank you, Your Highness. It has been a pleasure to ride by your side.”

“This isn’t the end of our journey together, Silas,” I replied, “though the choice lies with you. I would like to formally invite you to join the Council of Knights here at the palace. We seem to have an empty seat.”

A whirlwind of emotions passed across his face until he settled on shock and said, “Your Highness...that’s too kind. I really couldn’t...”

I waved a hand. “You belong on the Council, Silas. The kingdom is changing, and I need someone like you on my side, someone with strength and wisdom and humility. I will not force you, but don’t deny it because you think you don’t deserve it. That is the farthest thing from the truth. Think about it this afternoon. Discuss it with your family, and give me your answer tonight at dinner.”

His old face was red as he looked at his feet and said, “Thank you, son. I don’t know what to say, but I shall think about it and give you an answer soon.”

I smiled. “Good, now go. See your family.”

He nodded, and the others waved goodbye as he finally took his leave. I sincerely hoped he would take my offer. I needed someone I could trust on the Council; after everything that had happened, I couldn’t be sure who was with me and who was against me anymore.

“Well, Your Highnesses,” Sir Kent said, “I shall go make the dinner preparations and attend to some housekeeping matters. I will reconvene with you later.”

“Of course, Sir Kent,” I replied. “Thank you.”

That left Aunt Mag, Sky, Asmund, and me in the foyer. Aunt Mag was looking at the three of us rather inquisitively, and I knew what she was thinking. I knew how smug she would be when she discovered our new alliance. I should probably say something before she did.

WINTER'S WRATH

"Well, I don't know about you boys," Sky said, giving her shoulders a stretch, "but I would like to get off my feet for a bit and have a proper bath. I'll see you two at dinner."

"I'll walk with you," Aunt Mag offered. "I found this beautiful dress while you were away, and it would be perfect for this evening."

Sky beamed, and the two of them walked off down the hall arm in arm, already chatting away. I could almost see a weight lift off of Sky's shoulders as she let the past few months go. I wished I could do the same.

"And then there were two," Asmund said. "How are you holding up?"

I shrugged. "As well as can be expected. This dinner tonight should be riveting." I heaved a sigh.

Asmund put a hand on my shoulder. "At least I saved you from an endless meeting. The men won't be able to talk long with full stomachs and a few glasses of wine."

"I suppose you're right. I just hope I can last long enough. Do you think you can steer the conversation away from delicate topics?"

"I'll do what I can. Have you made any progress?"

I shook my head. "It hasn't been easy with all the soldiers around. I'm counting on having some free time and privacy in the next few weeks."

He nodded. "You'll get it, Isanfier, and in the meantime, we'll do what we can to keep it hidden. Are you sure you don't want to tell—"

"No," I interrupted him. "She's been through enough."

He rolled his eyes. "As you wish, but don't say I didn't tell you so when that backfires horribly."

I waved a hand. "Sky will forgive me, eventually."

He shrugged. "If you say so. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to have a bath of my own. My hair hasn't felt right in months."

Indeed he was right. His dreadlocks were quite matted, sticks and leaves stuck between the strands in some places. He hadn't

rebraided them in weeks, and I shuddered to think how long it would take him to untangle them.

Thank Fidal I kept my hair short. I had enough problems to deal with.

He gave me a quick parting remark and then left me alone with the remnants of our conversation.

Asmund was still the only one who knew about my magic, and I intended to keep it that way for as long as possible. Darkenier may be dead, but magic was still outlawed, and I did not yet possess the power to revoke his policies. There were undoubtedly many who supported his choice.

My magic had been quiet since our fight. I had spent many nights on the way back to Widonia trying to conjure it, sitting in silence in my tent until my fingernails drew lines on my closed fists and sweat beaded on my forehead. Nothing would come, not even a wisp of smoke, but I could feel it, lingering beneath my skin.

It flared up along with my anger, a slow simmer in my veins, and I knew it was only a matter of time before it broke free again, especially now that I had returned to the castle. I prayed I could learn to control it before it hurt me, or someone else.

• • •

My room was not how I remembered it. Everything was in the same place—my desk against the wall between the windows, my wardrobe to the left, my bed beside the door—but they weren't how I had left them. My bed was made, my wardrobe was shut tight, and the papers on my desk were stacked neatly in one corner, my quill pens safely tucked in their jar.

It was not the room I had left, and I was not the boy who had left it. There was a weight on my shoulders I feared I would never be rid of.

I threw my cloak on the bed and dropped Darkenier's sword on my desk. It hit the wood with a dull thud, and I felt like my room

WINTER'S WRATH

was tainted further by its presence. Shadows had killed my parents, had destroyed this kingdom so irrevocably that I wasn't sure I would ever be able to put the pieces back together. Darkenier's death was a start, but it was far from the end.

I walked away from the sword and pulled open my shutters, letting the Summer breeze air out my room and put my mind at rest. The coming months wouldn't be easy, but I had to take them one day at a time. The first thing to tackle would be tonight's dinner. We had to fill Sir Kent in on everything that had happened and begin planning our next steps.

A Regent would have to be chosen, to rule in my stead until my eighteenth birthday, but I couldn't stand idle and let others make decisions about my kingdom anymore. I would be crowned King in just over a year, and it was time to start acting like it.

I wouldn't let another man take too much power, become another tyrant. I took one last glance at the sword on my desk before heading into the bathing room to get ready for dinner. Its weight seemed to follow me in, and I had a feeling it would be a long time before the consequences of Darkenier's death truly left me.

2

Treachery and Truth

The sun had begun to set by the time I left my room for dinner, its dying light bathing my room in an orange glow. I closed the shutters on my windows and attached both *Ember* and *Shadows* to my belt, the former out of habit and the latter out of fear. Something told me I shouldn't let Darkenier's sword out of my sight until I laid it to rest in Widonia's cemetery.

Sky was waiting outside my room, and I nearly jumped out of my boots at the sight of her.

"Sancia's breath, Sky," I gasped. "Are you vying for the throne?"

She gave me a quizzical look. "What do you mean?"

I scowled. "Lurking outside my room is going to send me to an early grave."

She waved a gloved hand and half turned away. "Maybe that's a good thing. If you can't handle me, you won't stand a chance as King."

WINTER'S WRATH

"Very funny," I replied. "You look nice this evening," I added as I followed her down the hall.

Her long hair was piled atop her head in a dark braided bun, a few strands hanging loose to frame her face, and the dress Aunt Mag had picked was indeed perfect. It was a pale green with yellow flowers running around the skirt—simple yet elegant.

Sky smiled. "Thank you. I dare say I have missed wearing a dress. One without a corset, that is."

"I know I'm glad to be free of my armour and chainmail, but formal attire... I'm not desperate enough for that." I had changed into a fresh tunic in a chestnut brown colour and my usual black pants, going against my instincts to wear all black in hopes of putting the men at ease tonight.

She shrugged. "Men can get away with a little less frivolity, but Aunt Mag was devastated when she saw the state I was in, especially my hair. She's been pruning me for the past three hours."

I winced. "Could've been worse, I suppose. You could be Asmund. I swear he'll need to go bald to fix his hair."

Sky smirked. "I think that would make my entire year."

I smiled back. "I think he'd probably ask me to kill him."

We laughed then, and for the first time in weeks, I didn't feel like it was forced.

Sky and I were two of the last people to enter the dining hall, and the table was half full, a sight I hadn't seen since I was a child. On the left, Aunt Mag sat beside Sky's empty seat, Silas on her other side. On the right, Asmund sat beside the head with Sir Kent beside him. There were seven other chairs reserved for the knighted members of the Council, though I noticed the one directly beside Sir Kent was still empty. A quick study of the men present proved Sir Quinton was missing. His absence was odd, as he usually prided himself on impeccable manners, and I noticed a few of the other knights glancing at his empty seat as well.

Sky quickly took her seat beside Aunt Mag, greeting everyone at the table in turn, but I stood in the doorway, staring at the empty chair that had once belonged to Darkenier. It was mine now. I had every right to take it, but it felt wrong somehow, like I wasn't worthy of it.

We might be electing a Regent to rule in my stead for the next year and a half, but he wouldn't be given the same power and authority Darkenier once had. I was essentially the King already, albeit without the official title and heavy crown.

Could I lead these men, this kingdom, like he once had, like my father and grandfather before him? Darkenier might have had terrible intentions, but at least the kingdom had been strong under his rule.

Could I follow in his footsteps, or was I destined to destroy Summer and everything my ancestors had worked towards?

You can't know until you try, I reminded myself. Don't discount yourself before then.

I took a deep breath.

One step at a time.

I crossed the room and took my place at the head of the table, pulling my chair in tight before I could change my mind. The chatter around me died instantly, and I felt exposed, like the whole kingdom had its eyes on me. I looked over at Sky, and her encouraging smile put me at ease, if only a little. I took one last deep breath before addressing the room.

"Thank you all for coming," I said, forcing a smile onto my face. "It is an honour to have you at our dinner table. Gatherings such as these have been long overdue. I hope we can all enjoy the food and company, even as we discuss some delicate matters."

Asmund raised his glass, half full of red wine, and the table followed suit as he toasted to my words.

"I'm sure we are all honoured to be here," Kent replied. "It certainly is a pleasure to have everyone in the Capital again, but tell

WINTER'S WRATH

me, Your Highness, what is the whole story behind King Arkenier's death? Spare us no details."

I sighed. "It is not a happy tale, Captain, but it is one that must be told."

The next few minutes passed slowly as I recounted the events of the war and the final attack on Appalachia. The colour drained from Kent's face with each word I said, and Aunt Mag gasped out loud as I explained my and Sky's harrowing escape from Snowdon.

When I reached the part about Darkenier's betrayal, I was careful to keep my story the same as the one I'd given the men in the Winter palace, not once using his true name or mentioning that he was a Wyllan. It wasn't that I didn't trust Kent with the truth about Darkenier's identity, but I knew his trust in my story was already thin. Adding anything else might make him dismiss it entirely.

"Arkenier betrayed us all," I finished, "and nearly brought the entire realm down with him." I unclipped *Shadows* from my belt and set it gently on the table, careful not to upset any dishes. "This is all that is left of our late King."

Kent was silent, gazing at me and the sword, an expression I'd never seen him wear. I couldn't tell if he was more shocked or scared, but his eyes held a deep, irrevocable caution.

The servants entered the room with our first course then, saving him from the need to offer an immediate reply, and I removed *Shadows* from the table to give them space. Large bowls of orange soup were laid out before us, and we ate in silence for a few minutes, warmth seeping into our stomachs.

Finally, Kent found his words again. "I am so sorry, Your Highness. I feel as though I have failed this kingdom. How could I have not seen his treachery? How could I have swallowed his lies?"

I shook my head. "We cannot sink into despair; he was exceptional at what he did. The best way to give ourselves grace is to move on, move forward. Summer needs us to continue the fight, even in the face of adversity. Arkenier's death will sit with me for the rest of my days, but I would be doing this kingdom a disservice

by wallowing in my apparent shortcomings. As would you, or any of us at this table, for that matter.

"We survived the war," I went on. "We avenged King Oaden and Queen Areevia. Now we must bring Summer into a new era, to show Winter that this betrayal has not destroyed us."

Several at the table raised their glasses again, and Kent gave me a small smile. "I believe the kingdom is in good hands with you, Your Highness, and I am eager to help in any way I can, though I would caution against revealing your tale to the masses."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

Kent shifted in his seat. "I mean that learning of their King's death will be hard enough on the citizens of Summer, let alone trying to swallow the fact that their King betrayed them. It would only sow seeds of distrust. We can't have them questioning whether or not you will do the same."

I could see where he was coming from, but his words left an unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was already lying to the council about Darkenier's true identity and exactly how he had died; if I sold the people yet another story, I would run the risk of getting caught up in my own lies. Aside from that, Summer had a right to know the truth—as much of it as I could give them, anyway.

"Your concern has merit, Sir Kent," I replied, "but I will not lie to my people in the name of trust. I know some of them will not believe me. I know some of them may hate me for it, but the truth is bound to be discovered someday. What will the people think then? There will always be those who stand against the monarchy; I can't afford to lose the ones who *do* stand by me now."

"Your Highness—" Kent tried again, but I held up a hand.

"I will not entertain the idea further," I told him, "but your opinion is valued. It is important for ideas to be voiced and actions to be questioned. Which is why I would like to appoint you as my Regent, until I come of age."

WINTER'S WRATH

Kent's eyes widened in surprise, and there were murmurs of dissent around the table, but I raised my glass for silence, and the whispers died out.

"There will be time to counter my words," I told them, "but please hear me out before you dismiss them entirely." I paused and surveyed each man in turn before continuing. "I understand this is not the natural way, that there is meant to be a vote cast by all members of the Council after days of intense debate, but I believe Sir Kent has proven his worth for this position. The castle did not fall apart in our absence. The kingdom continued to flourish under his guiding hand. I may be young and untried, and I understand the need to postpone my crowning until my eighteenth birthday, but I also understand the war left us vulnerable.

"Our King is dead, and it will not take Winter long to exploit that, if they haven't made plans already. We can't afford to waste time conferring over possible candidates when the perfect one is sitting before us already."

The knights glanced between each other, sharing looks of unease and annoyance yet with an underlying feel of acceptance, as if knowing I was right but not wanting to admit it.

I knew I was pushing my limits, that I had already asked a lot of them tonight, but I couldn't budge on this request. The future of Summer depended on the new Regent being someone I could trust, and Sir Silas definitely wouldn't be on the table. I had to meet the Council in the middle.

The men remained silent until Sir Delwyn stood up and looked in my direction. "Your Highness," he said, "if I may add to your speech?"

I nodded, praying he wasn't about to condemn me.

Delwyn glanced around at his comrades and took a deep breath before beginning. "I can sense your unease, men, but there is merit in His Highness's words. Perhaps, in this new dawn of Summer, some traditions will have to be broken. It was the Council's poor judgment in the past which led to the traitor's kingship in the first place, so I

do not see how there can be any fault in letting Prince Isanfier choose his own Regent. Besides, how many of us were planning to recommend Sir Kent anyway? How many of us would've voted for him?"

Several men raised their hands, and Delwyn nodded.

"Then, if there are no further objections, I believe we have our answer."

"No further objections to what?"

Everyone turned to face the voice, and we watched as Sir Quinton waltzed into the dining hall as if nothing was amiss and we were all early instead of him late.

"Ah," Sir Saxon said, "so good of you to finally join us, Sir Quinton." There was a tone of distaste beneath his words I was sure Quinton didn't miss.

"My apologies for being late," Quinton replied. "Something came up."

Saxon raised a brow. "Something more important than this dinner? You do realize this is a discussion to solidify the future of our kingdom, correct?"

I could sense Quinton's urge to roll his eyes, but he held it back. "I understand your concern, Sir Saxon, but I assure you, I had my reasons, and I am here now. Have I missed much?"

Saxon opened his mouth to protest again, but Kent held up a hand. "That will be enough, Sir Saxon. Sir Quinton accompanied you all to the war, so I doubt there was much need for him to be present for the regaling of the tale. Please, Sir Quinton, have a seat. We were deciding on the matter of regency, and His Highness has appointed me, with the blessing of the rest of the men."

Quinton was moving to his empty seat but stopped short at Kent's words, giving me a sidelong glance. "His Highness *appointed* you? That's hardly in accordance with tradition."

"And yet, it has been decided," Sir Delwyn replied, a rough edge to his voice. "Perhaps if you were on time..." He let the rest of

WINTER'S WRATH

his sentence hang in midair, and Quinton took his seat with a scowl but without another word.

"Now that the matter is settled," I said, sensing it was time to turn the conversation elsewhere, "we should work on our next steps. Does anyone have any issues they'd like to bring to the table?"

Sky raised a hand, and I nodded. "We should start by arranging a memorial for the dead," she said. "Our people need closure. They need to know we are willing to acknowledge what they have lost."

Sir Saxon nodded solemnly. "Many good men were taken far too early; we need to honour their sacrifice."

"I agree," I replied. "Can I rely on you to arrange that, Sir Saxon?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. It'll be ready by the end of the week."

At the other end of the table, Sir Warmund raised his hand. "Go ahead," I told him.

"We also need to establish an improved, if not new, defence system. I suggest instating border patrols along the Edgewood and sending more untried youth to Skar for training. They need not become knights, but we will need more skilled fighters in the event of another war."

"More fighters are all well and good," Sir Delwyn countered, "but will the training be mandatory? How will the people receive such news after the family they've already lost?"

"Well, their sons will be more prepared should there be a next time. I believe that would be enough motivation."

Asmund raised his hand. "If I may interject?"

Warmund nodded.

"If it would help ease people's minds, I could perhaps train some boys here, at the barracks? I spent my childhood under the direct tutelage of Lord Arrath himself and was knighted this past spring. The idea of training may be more well received if the boys can still return home on days off."

Delwyn gave Asmund an appreciative look; even I was impressed by his generosity. "That could be an excellent

compromise, Master Asmund. We shall have to discuss it further before making a decision.”

Asmund nodded.

There was a lull in the conversation as the servants came to clear our plates, dish out the second course, and pour more wine. Our second course was a roast pig and several dishes of boiled and spiced vegetables.

The men dug into the meal with an unparalleled vigour, all but starving for real food after the months of dried meat, nuts, and the occasional rabbit or deer.

I ate slow, careful not to overwhelm my stomach, and watched the men around me, searching for anything amiss. It was going to be hard to trust anyone now, to look them in the eyes and believe their words as truth. Even giving the regency to Kent put me on edge, but the kingdom would certainly not accept me as King at sixteen years old. That was the one tradition I knew they wouldn't break.

As the men began to clean their plates and lean back in their chairs, Sir Kent stood up, clinking a spoon against his wine glass to grab everyone's attention. All eyes were on him as he spoke.

“I want to start by thanking you, Your Highness, for appointing me to the position of Regent,” he said, looking at me. “It is a great honour and a responsibility I will not take lightly. As Regent, it is my duty to ensure and strengthen the future of our kingdom. Thus, I would like to propose we begin preparations for a Festival of Honour.”

Murmurs rose up around the table, and I almost dropped my wine glass.

A Festival of Honour? Now?

I snuck a glance at Sky, and she looked as sick as I felt. We both knew it was coming, had been fearing it for years now, and yet, I always thought we would have more time.

Aunt Mag put an arm around Sky, as if sensing her discomfort, and said, “Are you sure the timing is wise, Sir Kent? Their

WINTER'S WRATH

Highnesses have barely returned from war. That can take some time to recover from."

"That is exactly why I have chosen now, Governess Magnolia. As our Prince said, Summer is vulnerable. We cannot wait any longer, especially now that the royal family has been reduced to two. His Highness must marry, start fathering children, and prepare to become King himself in a few years. We must solidify the future of this kingdom." He looked around the table. "Is anyone else opposed?"

No one raised a hand. Of course, Sky and I wouldn't get a vote in the matter. Our only consolation, I supposed, was that Darkenier's death had given us the gift of being able to choose our own bride and groom at the end of the Festival. Still, it wasn't much of a choice when our candidates were already set in stone and saying no wasn't an option.

"Then it is settled," Sir Kent went on. "I will send invitations out to our lords and ladies in the morning, and we shall begin preparations to host their eligible children. It will be a Festival of Honour to remember, a symbol of unity even after dark times."

Sir Delwyn raised his glass. "For the prosperity of Summer. Fidalia forever."

The others raised their glasses and repeated his words in unison. Sky and I followed suit but without the same excitement. It wasn't that I didn't agree with Sir Kent's sentiments; Summer did need more heirs, but it was horrible timing. The last thing I needed with unpredictable magic flowing through my veins was a castle full of people.

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Later, Sky sat on her bed as I paced the room. The rest of dinner had passed amicably, with plans made for Darkenier's "burial" and an announcement scheduled for tomorrow morning, but I couldn't get my mind off Kent's proposal.

"Isan," Sky said finally, "would you please sit down? You're going to wear a hole through the floor. There's nothing we can do about it now."

I forced myself to stand still. "That's just it, though, isn't it? The traitor's dead, Summer is free, and yet the two of us still have no say over our future. Are you prepared to be wed before your seventeenth birthday and be with child soon after? Sancia knows I'm far from ready to be a father; I can barely manage myself."

Sky winced at my words. "Maybe we can postpone having children? I don't think any of my suitors would be cruel enough to force..." She grimaced. "Fidal's breath, you're right, Isan, but I don't know what to do. I'm honestly surprised I wasn't married off sooner."

"We probably would've been, if more Sancian heirs hadn't been the exact opposite of Darkenier's plans."

Sky took a deep breath. "We'll have to see how everything plays out. At least you have some decent options."

I gave her a skeptical look. "The one thing we don't have is options, Sky. I barely know any of them. When was the last time the Norwells came to call?"

"I'm not sure," she replied. "They didn't exactly get along with Uncle, but at least Kainda and Gwyneth are a decent age. Weylyn is twelve. What am I supposed to do with him?"

"You keep track of how old they are?"

She frowned. "We're expected to. It's a part of our lessons, keeping all the noble families straight."

I ran a hand through my hair. "I think I'm going to need a review."

Sky sighed. "You know, someday I may not be around to be your brain." Before I could come up with a good retort, she rambled on. "There's Kainda, Gwyneth, and Weylyn from Ne-Trol; Penelope and Tamsen from Fortude; Soleia and Raina from Laurel; Jasper and Rosetta from Mensden; Dorin, Orella, Diera, Elena, and Euric from Cargoff, though Dorin is the only one who's of age; and, of course,

WINTER'S WRATH

Asmund and Aramina from Skar. Arran is off the table because he's already been appointed as Lord Arrath's heir."

My head spun at the influx of information. "And is there anyone we hate?"

"Not entirely, but I don't particularly wish to spend the rest of my life with any of them either." She groaned. "I feel so *selfish* for saying that, but it's the truth. What's the point of being royal if we can't even choose our partners? I am thankful for the freedom this war brought us, but I also curse it. We were given a taste of what could be, and now... It's hard to turn back."

I returned to pacing the room, my thoughts racing as I searched for a way out, but it looked like we were sincerely out of options. We couldn't run away from this problem and deal with the consequences later. We couldn't refuse to host the Festival of Honour without bringing the wrath of the Council and the noble families down upon us. The only thing we could do was stall, and even that wouldn't last long.

"Fidal's breath, Sky," I breathed, running a hand through my hair yet again. "I don't think I can get us out of this one. I could... I could ask to prioritize my own engagement, buy you some more time..."

Sky stood up and walked over, taking my hands in hers and stopping my pacing once more. "I can't ask you to do that, Isan. It would be incredibly selfish, and I don't want you to have to go through it alone. Besides, the Council isn't going to invite everyone here twice, not when we're the same age, and especially not after everything the war cost us." She squeezed my hand and met my sad eyes with her own. "If there's no way out of this, we're in it together."

Anger welled up in me at the thought of being forced to accept our fate, but I pushed it down before it could take hold of me.

That's the last thing I need right now.

"I guess, if nothing else, the festivities should distract us from our war trauma," I said.

She laughed, letting go of my hands. "I suppose it might be a welcome change—a castle full of people, vibrant decorations, music..." She closed her eyes and began to hum a slow tune.

It took me a minute, but I recognized it as *Whispers of Wisteria*, and Echo's face flashed through my mind. I wondered how she was doing, if she worried about us, if she knew what had happened in Winter, that Prince Snowdon and King Frost were dead.

"Isan? Are you okay?"

I realized then that Sky had stopped humming, and I shook my head to clear it. "I'm fine," I replied, "just lots on my mind. I wish there was some way to send a message to Echo, to let her know we're all right. Going to see her will be out of the question for now."

Sky's face fell again. "Sancia's breath, I forgot about that. She's going to be beside herself."

I sighed. "Unfortunately, there's not much we can do about it. I'd send Asmund, but his presence is required at the Festival, and I'm not entirely certain Echo wouldn't kill him on sight if he showed up alone."

Sky smiled. "Unlike you, Echo isn't that rash."

"I'll let that insult slide," I replied, "but you better stay on your toes."

She huffed a breath and wandered back over to the bed where she flopped down, rather unceremoniously, onto the voluptuous sheets. "Well," she said, "if we're actually doing this, are there any of them you fancy?"

I gave her a look she didn't see. "You can't be serious."

"What? I'm trying to make some fun out of it."

"As if *you'd* answer that question truthfully."

"I might, if there was an answer to give. As I said, my options are limited. Tamsen and Dorin are nice enough, but they're younger than me, which I think would be a strange dynamic. Jasper is older, but he's from Mensden, and I don't want to marry into Lord Byron's family if I can help it; they're insufferable."

WINTER'S WRATH

I snorted. "That's the understatement of the year. I guarantee you Rosetta will be all over me as soon as she gets here." I shuddered at the thought. The girl was beautiful, I could admit, but that was her only redeeming quality. I swear arrogance was bred into her body so thoroughly there was no room for brains or passion.

"I suppose there's always Asmund," Sky mused after a few moments of silence.

"Absolutely not," I replied, irritation seeping back into my veins.

Sky sat up, swinging her legs over the bed to face me. "Why? You two are friends now."

"More like tentative allies," I countered. "We've learned to tolerate each other, but that doesn't erase years of ridicule and every ugly word he ever said to you. Don't you remember what he was like?" I could feel my fire rising from the emotions my memories brought to the surface. If only I'd had magic back then; I would've put him in his place.

"Isan, calm down," Sky coaxed me. "You're shaking."

I looked down at my hands and was startled to see she was right. I clenched my fists and took a couple deep breaths to dispel the rage.

That was a close one.

"I'm only saying there will be people—half the Council at least—who will expect that of me," Sky said. "I know Uncle is gone now, but I'm not foolish enough to believe my betrothal is truly in our hands now."

My chest tightened at her words. "I'll do the best I can, Sky, to keep you safe."

"I know," she answered, looking at her feet. "I'm not getting my hopes up, though."

"What about Tamsen?" I asked her, trying to lighten the mood. "He's only one year younger, and you two were always thick as thieves when we were little. He'd make a good Prince Consort, with a little more combat training."

She gave me another look. "We were only so close because you and Penelope were, and if I marry him, that means Penelope isn't available for you."

"So?"

"So you've always fancied her, Isan. Now is your chance."

I shook my head as dread settled in the pit of my stomach.

She narrowed her eyes. "Why not? What didn't you tell me?"

"Nothing," I replied, turning away and walking over to the window.

"I know that look, Isan. Something happened."

I gripped the back of her desk chair as I said, "I, uh... kind of already took my chance, and she said no."

"What? When?"

"It was a few years ago, okay?" I replied without looking back at her. "I don't want to talk about it, and I'm not interested in asking her again. It was embarrassing enough the first time."

A long stretch of silence followed my words. I stared out the window as I remembered the day in question: the exhilaration on her face after the two of us had snuck out to the gardens unnoticed, my attempt to kiss her in what I'd thought was a perfect moment, and her ensuing tears as she'd explained she didn't feel that way about me. Her family had left the following day, and I hadn't seen her since, but the mistake still haunted me.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Sky standing behind me. "I understand, Isan," she said. "There are certain memories I keep to myself too, but I'm always here for you, okay?"

"I know," I replied.

"We should get some sleep," she went on. "We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. I'm not going to say it'll look better in the morning, but perhaps we will have some better ideas."

I shrugged, and her hand fell. "I suppose it's worth trying. To be honest, it feels a little weird to have a bed to sleep in again."

WINTER'S WRATH

She laughed. "I'm looking forward to easing my bruised muscles and battered bones. I've felt like an old lady for months now."

"Well, as long as you don't look like one, you'll be fine."

"Ha ha, hilarious."

"All right," I said, finally walking away from the window. "I'll get out of your hair. Whether or not I'll actually sleep is another matter entirely."

A look of concern flashed across her face. "The nightmare hasn't come back, has it?"

I shook my head. "No, but there's still a lot on my mind. I feel like I haven't slept properly in months, probably not since we left Echo's treehouse."

She sighed. "I wish there was something I could do, but..."

"It's okay, Sky. I'm strong enough to handle it, and besides, it might be better now that we're home."

"I hope so," she replied, fiddling with the end of her braid. "Let me know if you need me."

"I will. Goodnight."

"Goodnight. May Sancia be with you, and Wylla too, I suppose, for sleep."

I frowned at that as I left the room.

Throughout all my sleepless nights from that Fidal-forsaken nightmare, I'd never once reached out to Wylla to ask for a peaceful sleep. Though Echo had helped to ease my distrust of Winter, Darkenier had thrown my walls back up, and the thought of turning to Wylla to solve my problems felt like a betrayal, a slap in the face of everything Summer had suffered at the hands of the Winter royals.

No, I would suffer in silence, and if anything, I would pray to Stella for healing and Fidal for strength.

Thank you so much for reading this excerpt!

I hope you enjoyed this small taste of *Winter's Wrath* and if you'd like to read more, you can preorder your copy at the link below!

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<https://www.books2read.com/winterswrath>

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