

# The Winter King

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## Prologue ~ Scarlet on Snow

*King's Keep*  
*Vera Sola, Summerlea*

“Do you have to go?” Fourteen year old Khamsin Coruscate clung to her brother’s hand as if by her grip alone she could anchor him fast and keep him from leaving.

Falcon, the handsome Prince of Summerlea and the brother Kham had adored all her life, smiled indulgently. “You know I do. Our treaties with the Winter King are very

important.”

“But you’ll be home soon?” Whenever he was gone, the ancient walls of the royal palace of Summerlea that had been her home and her prison since birth seemed somehow more confining, more restrictive.

“Not this time, little sister.” Falcon shook his head. A strand of black hair that had pulled free of the queue at the back of his neck brushed against the soft, dark skin of his cheek. “It will take weeks to negotiate the treaties.”

Khamsin scowled, and the wind began to gust, sending Kham’s habitually untamed hair whipping into her mouth and eyes. “Why does he have to send you? Why can’t his ambassador negotiate the treaty? He’s sending you away because of me, isn’t he? Because he doesn’t want you spending so much time with me.” Her hands clenched into fists. The wind sent her skirts flying and a dark cloud rolled across the sun.

Their father, King Verdán IV of Summerlea, didn’t love her. She knew that. He kept her isolated in a remote part of the palace, hidden away from his court and his kingdom, on the pretext that her weathergifts were too volatile and dangerous and she couldn’t control them. That was all true. Kham’s gifts were dangerous, and she couldn’t control them any better than she could control her own temper. Until now, however, he’d never stooped to sending his other children away to keep them from visiting her.

“Here now. Be calm.” Falcon smoothed her wayward curls back, tucking them behind her ears. Compassion and pity shone softly in his eyes. “I wish I didn’t have to leave you. But our father believes I’ll have the best chance of getting what we want from Wintercraig, and I agree with him.” Summerlea, once a rich, thriving kingdom renowned for its fertile fields and abundant orchards, had been in a slow decline for years. Although the nobles and

king maintained a prosperous façade for political and economic purposes, beneath the gilded domes and bright splendor of Summerlea's palaces and grand estates, the rough tatters of neglect were beginning to show. "Besides, you won't be alone while I'm gone. You have Tildy and the Seasons."

"It isn't the same. They aren't you." He was the handsome Prince of Summerlea, charming, witty, heroic. He'd lived a life of adventure, most of which he shared with her, entertaining her for hours with the tales of his exploits...the places he'd seen, the people he'd met. His hunts, his adventures, his triumphs. No matter how much her nursemaid, Tildavera Greenleaf, doted on Khamsin, or how often the three princesses, Autumn, Spring, and Summer, snuck away from their palace duties to spend time with their ostracized youngest sister, Falcon was the one whose visits she couldn't live without.

"Now there's a pretty compliment. Careful, my lady. You'll turn my head." He smiled, and warmth poured into her. It was no wonder the ladies of their father's court swooned at the slightest attention from him. Falcon had a magical way about him. He could he charm the birds from the trees with his name-gift, and the weathergift inherent in his royal Summerlander blood was stronger than it had been in any crown prince in generations. It was as if the Sun itself had taken up residence in his soul, and its warmth spilled from him each time he smiled.

Kham took a deep breath. The sharp edge of her temper abated, and in the skies, the gathering storm began to calm. Perhaps King Verdán truly *had* chosen to send his only son as envoy to Wintercraig for political reasons after all. Long, long ago, as a small child crying herself to sleep, she'd decided Falcon was the reincarnation of Roland Triumphant, the Hero of Summerlea, the brave King who had defeated an overwhelming invasion force with

his wit, his weathergifts, and a legendary sword reputed to be a gift from the Sun God himself. If anyone could charm the cold, savage folk of the north into concessions most favorable to Summerlea, Falcon could.

“Will you at least write to me?” she asked.

“I’ll send you a bird every week.” He tapped her nose and gave her a charming, roguish grin. “Cheer up. Just think of all the swordfights you’ll win when you’re fighting invisible opponents instead of me.”

Kham rolled her eyes. He’d been teaching her sword-fighting for years, but she had yet to best him in a match.

“You know,” she said as they walked towards the doorway leading back into the palace, “it might actually be a good thing that you’ll be spending months in Wintercraig.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. You can use that time to find out what happened to Roland’s sword.”

Falcon tripped on an uneven flagstone and grabbed the trunk of a nearby tree to steady himself. “I’m sure I’ll be much too busy to chase fairy tales, Storm.”

She frowned in surprise. “But you’ve always believed the stories were true.” Blazing, the legendary sword of Roland Soldeus, had disappeared shortly after the heroic king’s death. The sword had disappeared shortly after Roland’s death. Donal, Roland’s brother, had married the Wintercraig princess who’d been betrothed to his brother, and legend claimed that it was her father, the Winter King, who had spirited the sword away so Donal couldn’t claim it. Every royal Summerlea Heir for the last three millennia had dreamed of finding the legendary blade and bringing it back home where it belonged. Falcon had spent years chasing lead after lead, determined that he would be the one to find Blazing and

restore Summerlea to its former glory.

“What about those letters?” she added. “The really old ones you found tucked in that trunk in the south tower attic? You said they proved the stories were true.”

“That was six years ago. I was seventeen. I *wanted* the stories to be true.” He gave her a quick hug and a brotherly kiss on the forehead. “I’ve got to run. I’m meeting with Father and his advisors to go over our list of demands and concessions one last time before I leave. I’ll see you in a few months.”

“I’ll miss you every day.” She trailed after him, feeling bereft and forlorn when Falcon turned the corner and disappeared from view. But this time, she also felt confused. She’d never known Falcon to give up on something he felt passionately about. And he’d been passionate about finding Roland’s sword. He’d been certain he was on the right trail. He’d shared his discoveries with her because he knew she was just as hungry as he to find the legendary sword.

So why would he deny it now?

\* \* \*

*Gildenheim, Wintercraig  
3 Months Later*

“She's not good for you.”

Wynter Atrialan, King of Wintercraig, cast a sideways glance at his younger brother. “Don't say that, Garrick. I know you've never liked Elka, but in six months' time, she will be my bride and your queen.”

Garrick shook his long, snow-silver hair. Eyes as bright and blue as the glacier caves in Wintercraig's ice-bound Skoerr Mountains shone with solemn intensity that made the boy look far older than his sixteen years.

"You love too deeply, Wyn. From the moment you decided to take her to wife, you've blinded yourself to her true nature."

Wynter sighed. "I should not have shared my worries with you when I first met her." Wyn was an intensely private man, but he'd never kept secrets from Garrick. Not one. Wyn had raised his brother since their parents' death twelve years ago. And in those years, he'd never tried to sweeten the ugly world of politics, never tried to gloss over his fears or concerns—even when it came to the more personal but still political matter of selecting a queen. If something happened to him, Garrick would be king, and Wyn didn't want his brother thrown into such a position without preparation.

Unfortunately, the years of openness and plain, unfettered talk had paid unanticipated returns. Because of his unflinching honesty with Garrick, no one in Wintercraig--no one in all the world, for that matter--knew him better than his young brother. Not even Wyn's lifelong friend and second-in-command, Valik. Such deep familiarity could be as troublesome as it was comforting.

"She is cold," Garrick insisted. "She does not love you as she should. She wants to be queen more than she wants to be your wife."

"Elka is a woman of the Craig. She is as reserved with her feelings as I."

"Is she? So that is why she laughs and smiles so warmly when the Summerlander is near?"

Wynter frowned a warning at his brother. "Careful, Garrick. Elka Villani will be my wife and queen. Insult to her is insult to me."

"I offered no insult. I merely asked a question. And based on my observations, it's a perfectly legitimate one."

“You are misreading what you see. Elka knows it’s vital the Summer Prince feels welcome here if we are to come to an amicable agreement.” The lush, fertile fields of Summerlea provided much needed sustenance to the folk of Wintercraig during the harsh, cold months of a northern winter. Their grains, fruits and vegetables, which Wintercraig bought with furs, whale oil and forest products, could mean the difference between life and death for his people during years when their own harvests were poor. That had, unfortunately, been quite often of late, since the summers had grown shorter and food from Summerlea had been growing steadily more dear after Wynter had taken the throne. Falcon Coruscate, son of the weathermage king who ruled Summerlea, had come at Wynter’s invitation to negotiate terms of a new treaty that would ensure longer summers in the north and more affordable trade in foodstuffs for the winters.

“She makes him feel welcome to more than the court,” Garrick corrected. “She flirts.”

Wyn arched a brow. “And if she does, where’s the harm in it? A pretty face and a sweet smile can persuade a man better than cold figures and dry treaties—especially self-indulgent peacocks like the Summer Prince.” He smiled when Garrick rolled his eyes. “You don’t remember our mother, but she could charm a frost giant into the fire. Father used to call her his secret weapon. Elka merely uses her gifts to aid the realm, as any good queen would.”

Garrick gave a snort. “How fortunate that she takes to the task so well. All right, all right.” He held up his hands in surrender when his brother’s glance sharpened. He paused a moment, using hammer and chisel to chip unwanted ice from the frozen sculpture he was working on, then added, “But even if you trust her, you’d best keep an eye on the Summerlander. He’s up to something.”

“Foreign dignitaries are always up to something. That’s called politics.”

“He’s been asking too many questions about the Book of Riddles.”

Wyn’s hand stilled momentarily in its work on his own sculpture. “Has he?” He tried to pull of nonchalance, but shouldn’t have bothered. Garrick knew him too well.

“That’s what he’s really here for. To get the book and find Roland’s sword.”

Roland’s sword was a fabled Summerlea weapon of inconceivable power. It had disappeared three thousand years ago, not long after the Summer King who first wielded it sacrificed his life to save his kingdom from invasion. Many myths and legends swirled around its disappearance. One of those legends suggested that the sword had been smuggled out of Summerlea into Wintercraig, and that the Winter King of that time, fearing the sword’s power would be misused by Roland’s successors, hid the sword in a place it would never be found. According to that legend, the Winter King had also left behind a book of obscure clues and riddles that supposedly led to its secret hiding place, in case his own descendants one day had need of the sword’s vast power.

“Well, good luck to him with that,” Wynter said. “The sword is a myth. It’s long gone by now, if it ever existed at all. And he won’t find whatever treasure the Book actually does protect, either, because he will never find the Book. It’s kept in a place no man can go.”

“But Elka can.”

He scowled. “Garrick, stop. She is my bride. She will be my queen. She would never betray me.”

Garrick heaved a sigh. “Fine. She is your true and worthy love. I’ll never suggest otherwise again.”

“Good.” Wyn pressed his lips together and focused on the small block of ice sitting on



the pedestal before him. With care and precision, he shaved and chipped away at the frozen water, until beneath his skillful hands, a bouquet of delicate lilies emerged from the unremarkable block. Patient as time itself, he carved away the excess ice until he revealed the hidden beauty inside. Fragile, shimmering petals curved with incredible delicacy, each distinct and perfect, rising up from slender stems of ice. "What do you think?" he asked when it was done.

"That's beautiful, Wyn. One of your best yet."

Wyn smiled. When it came to ice sculptures, Garrick hoarded his compliments like a miser. Only perfection earned his highest praise.

"Do you think she will like it, then? Frost lilies are her favorite."

Garrick stepped abruptly away from his own sculpture--a complex scene depicting a family of deer welcoming their newest, spindly-legged member into the herd--and brushed the dusting of ice crystals from his furs. "Any woman who truly loves you would love it, Wyn. It's obvious how much care you put into it."

"Then she will love it. You'll see."

"I'm sure she will," Garrick said, but his eyes held no conviction.

\* \* \*

### Two weeks later

"Coruscate!" Wynter's roar shook the great crystal chandelier that hung in the entry hall of his palace, Gildenheim. He stormed up the winding stairs to the wing where royal guests were housed and burst into the rooms that had been occupied for the last two months by the Prince of Summerlea. The rooms were empty, and judging by the state of the open drawers and the clothes flung haphazardly about, the inhabitants had vacated the

place in a hurry.

“He’s gone, Wyn.” Valik, Wynter’s oldest friend and second in command stepped into the room. “Laci checked the temple. The book’s gone, too.”

Wynter swore under his breath. “When did they leave?”

“About an hour after we left for Hileje. Elka and his guard went with him. Bron didn’t think anything of it. The Summerlander kept blathering about not letting some fire ten miles away ruin a good day’s hunt.”

“We’d better start tracking them, then.”

“There’s more, Wyn.” Valik hesitated, then said, “I think Garrick went after them. He and his friends rode out not long after the Summerlander. Bron heard them talking about something the Summerlander took that Garrick meant to get back.”

Wyn’s jaw turned to granite. With Valik close on his heels, he ran back down to the courtyard.

Still saddled and ready to ride, Wynter’s stallion, Hodri, was waiting in the hands of a stableboy, and beside him, a dozen of Wynter’s elite White Guard held Prince Falcon’s valet at swordpoint. The valet looked nothing like the sleek, meticulously turned-out peacock Wynter’s courtiers had mocked amongst themselves. He’d traded his velvet brocade livery for rough-spun woolens, a furred vest, and a heavy cloak. His knuckles were scraped, and his face sported a bruised jaw and an eye that was swollen shut and rapidly purpling.

“We found him in the village trying to bribe a merchant to smuggle him out in a trade cart, Sire.”

“Where is he?” Wyn grabbed the valet by his vest, yanking him up so fast the man’s feet left the ground. Wynter was tall, even for a man of the Craig, and holding the

Summerlander at eye level left almost two feet between the man's dangling toes and the icy stone of the courtyard. "Where is that Coruscate bastard you serve?"

"I don't know!" Clearly terrified, the man started babbling. "I swear to you, Your Majesty! I didn't even know he was leaving until one of the maids delivered his note. And that only advised me to leave Wintercraig as quickly and quietly as possible."

"In other words, the coward abandoned you while saving his own skin." Wyn threw the man aside. "Lock him up. If we don't find his master, he can face the mercy of the mountains in his prince's stead. The rest of you, mount up. Time to hunt."

Minutes later, Wynter, Valik, and two dozen White Guard were galloping down the winding mountain road that led from Gildenheim to the valley below. Wynter howled a call to the wolves as they went, sending a summons to the packs that were spirit-kin to his family's clan. Wolves were faster in the dense woods, and they tracked by scent rather than sight. The Summerlanders' smell was alien to this part of the world, so the wolves should have no trouble picking up their trail.

He wasn't sure if the prince would try heading south, towards Summerlea, or west to the Llaskroner fjord. The fjord was closer, and the port there was a busy one, full of strangers from distant lands. For thieves looking to get out of country quickly, that was the better destination. When the wolf call came from the west, Wyn knew he'd guessed right. He whispered to the winds, calling to the old Winterman in the north to blow his icy horn, then calling upon the Vestras, the freezing maritime winds of the western seas to send their bone-chilling fog.

As he and his men rode west, following the call of the wolves, the temperatures began to drop. If the Summer Prince fought back, that would pinpoint his location. If he didn't,

the rapidly worsening weather would slow his escape. Either way, Wynter would track him down, and make him pay for what he'd done to the people of Hileje.

The prince had hours on him. That was the purpose of the fire in Hileje—a distraction to get Wynter and his men out of the palace so Falcon Coruscate could steal what he came for and make his escape. But the distraction had been much more than a mere fire. The Summerlanders had raped and murdered dozens of villagers, then locked the rest in the meeting hall and burned them alive.

Eighty-six lives wiped out in one senseless act of violence. Eighty-six innocent Winterfolk who had depended on their king to protect them. And he had failed.

The tone of the wolves' howls suddenly changed. Rather than the pack call to the hunt, the howls were longer, mournful. The howl that announced a loss to the pack. Wynter sent out his thoughts, connecting to the pack mind, seeing through the wolves' eyes as he searched for the source of that cry. He caught a glimpse of bright scarlet splashed across the snow, bodies that were clothed not furred.

"No!" He knew instantly why the wolves howled and for whom. "No! Garrick!" He spurred Hodri faster, galloping at a reckless pace. The wind whistled past his ears. Snow flew from Hodri's hooves.

It didn't take long to reach the clearing where the wolves had gathered. The smell of death filled the air—a dark odor Wynter had smelled before. It was a scent few men ever forgot.

He reined Hodri in hard, leaping from saddle to ground before the horse fully stopped. The first two bodies were boys Wyn recognized. Garrick's friends. Sixteen years old, the same age as Garrick. Arrow-pierced through their hearts. They'd been dead within

minutes of being struck.

A moaning cough brought Wyn scrambling to his feet. He half-ran, half-stumbled across the snow towards the source of the sound, but when he got there, he felt as if his heart had stopped beating. He fell to his knees.

The coughing boy was another Wyn knew. Garrick's best friend, Junnar. He was mumbling incoherently. He'd been gut-shot, and the dark, matter-filled blood oozing from the wound told Wynter the boy was a dead man even though his body still clung weakly to the last threads of his life.

Junnar lay atop the prone, lifeless figure of Wynter's brother—the only family he had left in the world. An arrow--its shaft painted with the colors of the Prince of Summerlea himself--protruded from Garrick's throat.

"Garrick?" After moving Junnar to one side and packing his wound with snow to numb the pain, Wyn reached for his brother with trembling hands. His thumb's brushed the boy's face, and he flinched at the coldness of his brother's flesh. He'd been dead for hours. Probably since before Wyn had left Gildenheim in pursuit.

Horses approached from Wynter's back. Then Valik was there, laying a sympathetic hand on Wynter's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, my friend. I'm so sorry."

Wyn nodded numbly. The ache was consuming him. The pain so deep, so indescribable, it was beyond feeling. His whole body felt frozen, like the ice statues he and Garrick carved together.

"Help Junnar." How he spoke, he didn't know. His voice came out a choked, gravelly rasp. "Make him as comfortable as you can."

“Of course.”

He waited for Valik to lift Junnar and settle him off a short distance before gathering Garrick’s body into his arms. He held his brother for a long time, held him until Junnar breathed his last and the White Guard packed the bodies up for transport back to Gildenheim. Their hunt for Prince Falcon of Summerlea had ended the moment Wynter found his brother’s corpse. But there was no doubt in any of their minds that this was far from over.

Wynter carried Garrick in front of him on Hodri’s back, cradling his body as he had so many times over the years after their parents had died and it had fallen to him to raise his brother. He carried him all the way to Gildenheim, releasing him only to the weeping servants who would prepare Garrick and the others for the funeral pyre.

Wynter stood vigil by his brother’s side throughout the night. He murmured words of sympathy to the parents of the other lost boys, but shed no tears of his own though his eyes burned. At dusk the following night, he stood, tall and dry-eyed beside the pyres as the flames were lit and remained standing, motionless and without speaking, throughout the night and into the next morning. He stood until the pyre was naught but flickering coals. And when it was done and there was nothing left of his brother but ash, Wynter mounted Hodri and took the long, winding road to the Temple of Wyrn, which was carved into the side of the next mountain.

Galacia Frey, the imposing and statuesque High Priestess of Wyrn, was waiting for him inside the temple. She had come the night before to bless his brother and the others and to light their pyres, before returning to the temple to await his visit.

“You know why I have come.”

Her eyes were steady. “I know. But Wyn, my friend, you know I must ask you to reconsider. You know the price.”

“I know and accept it.”

“There’s no guarantee the goddess will find you worthy,” she warned. “Many men have tried and died.”

“You think that frightens me? If I die, I will be with my brother. If I survive, I will have the power to avenge him.”

She closed her eyes briefly and inclined her head. “Then take the path to the left of the altar, Wynter Atrialan, King of the Craig. Leave your armor, clothes and weapons in the trunk by the door. You must enter the test as you entered the world. And may the goddess have mercy on your soul.”

## Chapter One – Wynter’s Chill

*Vera Sola, Summerlea*  
*Three years later*

“He’s here!”

The news swept through the royal palace of Summerlea on an icy wind. Smiles froze on suddenly frightened faces. Laughter—so ebulliently prevalent even after the past three years of bitter war and hardship—faded into silence like the last notes of a dying song.

High above the palace, amid the tangled overgrowth of her mother’s forgotten Sky Garden, Khamsin Coruscate battled an invisible foe beneath the flowering branches of a Snowfire tree, unaware of the fear spreading through the city below. The last few months’ unseasonable cold had left all the other trees in the garden winter-bare, but the Snowfire bloomed defiantly. Its long, slender branches were bursting with bold, hot pink blossoms that filled the air with a heady perfume as if to ward off the invading cold with the deep, lusty scents of summer.

Despite the Snowfire’s brave show, winter would not be swayed. A light snow had begun to fall and the tip of Khamsin’s nose had gone pink. She paid it no mind. She was engaged in a ferocious sword fight with a powerful and conniving enemy, Ranulf the Dread, the villainous king whose attempt to invade and conquer Summerlea was immortalized in Khamsin’s favorite book, *Roland Triumphant: Hero of Summerlea*.



As she lunged and parried, locking blades with her invisible foe, Khamsin didn't even notice the approach of her maid, Tildy, until the elderly woman stopped directly beside the Snowfire tree and cleared her throat.

"He's here, dearly," Tildy said.

Khamsin lunged, crowing in victory as her blade struck a killing blow. Straightening, she blinked once to clear her mind of visions of ancient, heroic battles, and squinted at her beloved nurse. "Here? Already?"

"Riding past the Stone Knights, arrogant as you please, not fifteen minutes ago. Your father and the court have gathered in the upper bailey to greet him."

Roland and his foes forgotten, Khamsin snatched up her cloak and the well-worn copy of Roland Triumphant that had inspired her mock battle. She thrust through the long, whiplike branches of the Snowfire, ignoring the sound of ripping cloth and even the painful tug of black curls as hair and clothes caught and tore on the sharp edges of previous seasons' pruned branches. "Why didn't you come for me sooner? He'll be coming up the Castle Road by now."

"I came as quick as I could, dearly, but he's an hour early and these old bones don't move as fast as once they did. Och, now, look at the mess you've made of yourself." Tildy tsked and shook her neat cap of tight silver-gray plaits. She hurried forward, and Khamsin stood with familiar patience as her nurse clucked about her and quickly re-pinned her hair to hide the distinctive white streaks that threaded like bolts of lightning through her otherwise unremarkable Summerlander black hair. "Half a dozen tears already and mud on your hem. Your father won't be pleased if he sees you like this."

That was nothing new. When in all of Khamsin's almost eighteen years had her father

ever been pleased with her? Still...she couldn't hold back the hopeful question, "Did he...ask for me to join the family?"

The old nursemaid's expression faltered for a moment, pity creeping into her gaze. "No, child. He didn't."

Khamsin drew a breath, and buried the hurt with a nod. After all this time, it was foolish to still let the rejection hurt. Since age three, she'd lived as little more than a servant, dressed in cast-off gowns, ignored and forgotten, tutored only because Tildy refused to let the mind of a Summerlea princess go ignorant and unprepared. Few outside the palace gates even remembered there had ever been a fourth princess of the Summer Throne. Fewer still knew what she looked like, or even that she was still alive. Nonetheless, at every state function, Tildy insisted on dressing her charge like the royal princess of Summerlea she was, and they would wait together, in silence and dying hope, for the summons that never came.

"It's all right, Tildy." She forced a smile. "I'll just go to the tower and watch from there. The stone amplifies the voices in the bailey, so I'll hear everything. And I'll have a much better view, I'm sure."

"Dearly..."

Khamsin didn't want to hear the consolations and excuses, the empty promises that one day her father would realize what a treasure she was. She thrust her book into the nursemaid's hands, lifted the mud-stained hem of her red velvet skirts, and ran.

Hard-soled leather boots slapped on cold stone, and her black cape whipped behind her as she darted through the open garden gate and up the steps to the castle tower. Her mother's garden had been built high on the crest of a small man-made mountain around

which the ancient stone walls of Summerlea's palace and surrounding city ringed like ribbons round a maypole. Only the tower proper—the now-crumbling Keep of Kings—rose higher than her mother's beloved Sky Garden. The Keep overlooked the upper palace bailey and the long, curving lanes that ringed down to the city's main gates and the valley below.

With swift familiarity born of years spent running wild through the palace's many forgotten places, Khamsin darted through the dim corridors. After her mother's death, the upper reaches of the palace had been locked away, left to weather the years untended and uninhabited. Only a curious child, a princess as neglected as this once lovely palace realm, had ever dared the king's wrath and ventured secretly within. It was the one place—the only place—Khamsin had ever felt at home.

Her cape caught on a protruding nailhead, and the sudden yanking pull all but strangled her. Khamsin ripped at the frogs that clasped the cape around her throat, tearing one free and ripping the delicate lace at her neckline. The cape fell in a puddle of watered silk and black velvet. The simple golden circlet Tildy had so lovingly settled in place in Khamsin's curls earlier that morning cocked awkwardly over one brow, dislodged by her brief struggles with the cape. With an angry sob, she tore the circlet free and threw it on the pile of silk and velvet.

Her hair came unpinned again, falling about her shoulder in untamed ringlets, the white streaks that had always been so offensive to her father once more in plain view. She didn't care. Let him see her and be enraged. At least then he'd be forced to feel something. Even fury, was better than years of neglect.

Freed of cape and crown, once carefully-pinned ringlets now spilling haphazardly

down her back, she resumed her dash through the tower. A few moments later, she crossed the wide, cobweb- and dust-covered room that had once been the Queen's bower.

Silent hulks of furniture, shrouded in linen swaths, filled the room. Along the walls, moth eaten window hangings and tapestries sagged in mournful tatters. After the queen's death, King Verdan had ordered the bower entombed, Queen Rosalind's belongings covered with sheets and left where they lie.

Across the room, a narrow lip of stairs curved up the tower wall to a small landing and an arched doorway. She leapt the stairs three at a time and rushed breathless into the small covered oriel overlooking the courtyard and city below.

She caught her heaving breath and wiped at the useless tears that still sometimes insisted on spilling from her eyes. It didn't matter. She didn't need her father's love. She didn't even need the recognition of her birth-status. She had Tildy and her sisters, who loved her despite him. She'd had her brother's love, too, until he'd run off with the Winter King's bride and fled for his life, taking his purloined lady with him. And, of course, she had her mother's treasures to remind her that Queen Rosalind, at least, had loved her last-born child even if her husband would not.

The clatter of hooves in the courtyard below made Khamsin flinch. She glanced down into the bailey and froze, all thoughts of her father and his long neglect swept away in an instant. Fascination and stunned awe took their place.

Now, there was a sight no Summerlander had ever seen before.

Shining white, brilliant pale, like an army of snow-cloaked conquering ghosts, the soldiers of Winter rode proud into the upper bailey of Summerlea. And at the army's head, just now passing through the gate, rode the White King himself, Wynter Atrialan, King of

the Craig.

He sat on a snow white stallion, as poised, cold and merciless as a headsman's axe just before the chop. Armor of mirror-polished silver plate gleamed from crown to toe. A long, ice-blue cape trimmed in white ermine trailed out behind him, covering his mount's rump and draping down past the Winter King's own armored heels. At the crown of his helm, a tall ruff of ice-blue horsehair ruffled in the chill breeze, and his stallion's iron-shod hooves rang out on the worn cobble of the courtyard.

The horse came to a halt. The Winter King swung one long leg over his mount and slid effortlessly to the ground. Summer Sun! He was huge—practically a giant. Taller than any Summerlander, with the broadest shoulder she'd ever seen. Over seven feet of powerful muscles and sheer intimidation. She hadn't expected that. Beneath his silver helm, a mask in the shape of a snarling wolf's head hid his face.

His hands, clad in silver-mail gauntlets, rose to unlatch the mask and lift the helm from his head. He tucked it beneath one arm, leaving his sword arm free, hand resting near the hilt of the now infamous blade, Gunterfys – Giant Killer. A blade that after the last three years would be better named Ertafys – Summer Killer.

Even from her vantage point high above, she could see the Winter King's face. Square jaw, cheekbones high and shapely, skin a surprising golden hue, the color of browned butter. She'd always thought the folk of Wintercraig would be snowy-pale, but they weren't. At least, he wasn't. Which only made his wealth of long gleaming white hair and startling pale eyes seem all the more vivid.

He was handsome. Beyond handsome.

She hadn't expected that either. Khamsin sucked in a breath, then coughed as the

cold air dried and chilled her throat.

Silver-blue eyes, clear and cold as glacier ice, cast upward, finding her in one swift, sharp instant, pinning her in place. All thought fled her mind. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. She could only stare, captured and frozen, as the Winter King's blazing ice-fire eyes held and plundered her.

How long she stood there, motionless, she couldn't say. Each moment lasted a lifetime. First ice, then fire scorched her cheeks. Then ice again when, at last, the Winter King turned his gaze away and freed her.

She stumbled back into the shadows of the oriel and lifted trembling hands to cover her face. Her heart pounded heavy in her chest, each beat a labored thud. The blood in her veins felt slow and sluggish, her mind dazed, and a distinct chill had invaded her flesh.

She was shivering violently by the time she reached the bottom of her stairs.

"Dearly!" Tildy exclaimed in worried tones. The old nursemaid limped across the room to bundle Khamsin up in the warm velvet folds of her abandoned cape. "What were you thinking, child, to stand up there in the wind with naught to cover you but one thin dress? Your skin's gone cold as ice."

"S-sorry, Tildy," Khamsin apologized through numb lips and chattering teeth. With one long glance, the Winter King had all but frozen her to death. The only spot of warmth on all her skin was the small, rose-shaped birthmark on her inner right wrist—proof of her royal Summerlea heritage.

\* \* \*

Wynter cast a cold, keen, wary gaze around the courtyard, missing nothing. The sound from up high few minutes ago had set him on edge. He'd shot an Ice Gaze at the

would-be assassin, only to capture instead a dark, unruly haired servant girl dressed in some noblewoman's tattered cast-off gown and watching the proceedings in the courtyard with wide gray eyes.

He'd known in an instant she was no assassin. There was something...innocent...about her. Something intriguing about the wild tumble of black curls blowing around her pretty, sun-bronzed face—besides the odd streaks of white tangled in with the dark, like glacial waterfalls frozen against black rock. Well, no matter. He wasn't here to entertain himself with servants—even the intriguing ones. Not that she'd willingly come within a hundred yards of him again. Had he held his Gaze a moment longer, he would have frozen her where she stood.

Wynter directed his attention back to the royal family of Summerlea, who had assembled on the palace steps as he'd commanded. King Verdan, his dark, swarthy face as full of false pride as ever, stood at the forefront, clad in full court dress. Still fit after thirty years of kingship and decades of indulgent living, the Summer King boasted a vivid masculine beauty. He was tall and well-muscled, with dark snapping eyes, rich coloring, and an intrinsic Summer warmth so different than the colder, paler folk of the north.

His son, the prince called Falcon, had been much the same.

Was that foreign warmth the temptation that had lured Elka from her vows?

Behind Verdan, standing as close together as they could without appearing to huddle, waited his three lovely daughters. They were—justly so, Wynter now realized—as famous for their exotic beauty as for their Summerlea gifts. What their real names were, he neither knew nor cared. They were easy enough to identify by their giftnames: Spring, the eldest, a tall, cool beauty with bright green eyes and inky hair straight as falls of snowmelt pelting

down a cliff side; Summer, the middle daughter, whose thick waves of blue-black hair and summer blue eyes promised a warmth long lacking in the Craig; and the youngest, Autumn, a haughty creature blessed with loose, flowing ringlets of a rare, deep auburn that set off her pansy-purple eyes to perfection. These were Summerlea's greatest treasures: the three Seasons, beloved daughters of the Summer King.

The corner of Wynter's mouth curled in a faint smile. This victory would not be without its pleasures.

"King Verdán." He turned his gaze upon the former ally whom he'd spent the last three years bringing to heel. "I have come, as I vowed when last we met on the field of battle, to issue the terms of peace and claim what is my due."

Summerlea's ruler nodded stiffly. "I am prepared to receive and meet your demands."

"Are you? Good." Wynter gestured to the white-cloaked army behind him. "First, you will quarter my men. Your Steward of the Keep will escort my Steward of Troops, Lord Valik, on a tour of the city and palace defenses. He will deploy my men throughout the city...to discourage any courageous acts of rebellion your loyal followers might entertain," he added with a cold, knowing smile.

Verdán flushed but did not look away.

"You will quarter me as well," Wynter continued. "Richly. With a warm bath and a hot meal to refresh me after my journey. And one of your beloved daughters..." He perused the three princesses and settled on the haughty beauty with the flashing pansy-purple eyes. "Autumn, I think...to share my meal." Again he smiled, without a hint of warmth. "To discourage any...overspicing."

"Very well," Verdán bit out, not rising to the bait. "We have prepared a suite for you.



Luxurious in every appointment. You will not be disappointed.”

“Won’t I? I understand the rooms you have prepared for me once belonged to your son, Prince Falcon.” He enjoyed the shock on Verdan’s face and the quick, panicked flicker of his eyes. Let him wonder how the Winter King had learned that bit of news. “Did you really think I would rest in the bedchamber of the thief who stole my bride and murdered my heir?” Just the mention of that terrible day brought the memory of it back in vivid color. White. The color of fresh-fallen snow. Dark blue-green. The color of winter spruce and his brother Garrick’s hunting leathers. Red. The color of Garrick’s blood. So much blood. Blue. The color of the sky, of Garrick’s sightless eyes, and of the Summerlea arrow rising up from Garrick’s throat.

Wynter’s jaw tightened. The now-familiar burn of power sparked at the backs of his eyes. If he unleashed what lived inside him, he could kill every living thing in the city in a matter of minutes.

“I—but—” Verdan clamped his lips closed and gathered his composure. He bowed. “Then, of course, we will make other preparations.”

Wynter blanked the signs of temper from his face. “I understand the upper levels of your tower are unoccupied.” He nodded at the stone edifice behind the Summer King. The servant girl was gone from the small oriel above. “I will take those.”

“The tower has been unoccupied for years. It has fallen into a state of disrepair. Surely—”

“Consider it a test of your willingness to please me. Your servants have six hours to see to it. Clean, well-appointed rooms, a warm bath, and a hot meal,” he repeated. “And your daughter, the princess Autumn, with a pleasant smile on her face, to dine with me.

While you see it done, I will tour the city with Valik and your steward.”

“But...the war...your terms for peace, sir?”

“When I am rested and refreshed, we will meet to discuss the particulars of Summerlea’s surrender and the price of peace between us.” When no one moved, he lifted one mocking brow. “Six hours is little enough time to produce the perfection I demand. Believe me, King Verdan, you would be wise to ensure I am pleased with your hospitality. I am a far less forgiving man than once I was. You and your son taught me the folly of dealing gently with Summerlanders.”

\* \* \*

“He’s taking my mother’s rooms?” Khamsin stared at Tildy in dismay. “How could father allow it?”

The nursemaid gathered a pile of fresh, folded bedclothes and bath towels from a linen room fragrant with rosemary. “He could hardly say no, now could he, dearly?” Tildy answered practically. “Conquered kings may keep their heads, but rarely their pride or authority. There’s a new king in Summerlea now, child, and his name is Wynter of the Craig. Best we all get used to it.”

“But...my mother’s rooms...the Sky Garden....”

“Is his, to do with as he pleases.” Tildy nodded her head at the open door. “Close the door, dearly, to keep in the scent.”

“I don’t accept that.” She shut the door. “I won’t accept that. My mother’s rooms are off limits...private. It’s been that way all my life.”

“That was your father’s law. This is the White King’s will. We do as he commands now.”

“Why? Because he beat a shivering army into surrender? Bah! Politics and the rules of war be damned! We should not bow to this usurper’s demands like a pack of frightened mice!” The invasion of her mother’s rooms was personal. It was a defilement of a silent, sacred memorial to the beautiful Summerlea queen who’d died long before her time.

Tildy stopped in her tracks, her spine going straight as a poker. She turned and cast a dark glance back at Khamsin, a silent reminder of who had raised whom from infancy. “Politics? Is what you think this is?” the older woman asked in an arch voice. “Mind your temper, and use that brain God gave you! This isn’t politics we’re talking about. It’s survival. Your father’s and your own to boot. Displease the Winter King, and we’ll none of us see another spring.”

“What joy does a slave find in spring?” Khamsin countered bitterly. “Better to die a hero’s death like Roland than live ten lifetimes cowering beneath a conqueror’s heel!”

“Hush!” Setting the pile of linen’s on a nearby table, Tildy crossed the room to take Khamsin’s shoulders in a firm grip and shake her soundly. “That is childish idiocy speaking. I’ve taught you better. Roland died a hero, aye, but his line died with him. You are an Heir to the Summer Throne. So long as you and your family live—even one of you—there is hope for us all. Would you fling yourself to your death without a care for those who love you? Without a thought for those whose care you ought to put before your own? Have I failed so utterly that I’ve raised a blind, vain fool instead of a princess fit to wear the crown?”

Feeling sullen—shamed and wounded by the scold—Khamsin dropped her gaze. “No,” she muttered. “You haven’t failed, Tildy.” She shook free of her nursemaid’s harsh grip. Her velvet-clad arms crossed over her chest. “Fine.” She couldn’t summon gracious

defeat, but then, she'd never been able to do that—not even when the defeat was as minor as losing a game of Aces at cards. “I will not obstruct.” Her eyes flashed. “But I won't help either.”

The nursemaid sighed and shook her long-ago silvered hair. “That would be too much to ask, dearly. I'll be happy just to hear you promise not to summon a cyclone in his bath—especially not when he's in it.”

She kicked a nearby table leg and scuffed the toe of her leather slipper. Tildy knew her too well. “No cyclone. I promise.” Her gaze shot up with sudden defiance. “But I am going to collect the dearest of my mother's belongings before he claims her rooms.” She'd never dared remove them before now, lest her father discover she'd entered the tower against his will.

“As well you should.” Tildy had been Queen Rosalind's nursemaid, too. She had followed her charge from the gentle, ocean-side kingdom of Seahaven, twenty-eight years ago, and stayed to raise Rosalind's children as she had raised Rosalind herself.

Tildy started to pick up her linens again, then stopped and turned to wrap Khamsin in a tight, loving embrace. “Don't fight so hard against things you can't change, child. You'll batter yourself to death. Learn to change what you can, and accept what you can't. Be the palm that bends in the wind to withstand the gale.”

Khamsin stood silent as Tildy walked out the door.

She was no flexible palm. She was, instead, like the Snowfire in her mother's garden, bursting into bright, defiant bloom when temperatures plummeted and snow began to fall, daring winter to do its worst.

She scowled and clenched her long, slender fingers into fists. She'd vowed no

obstructions to the claiming of her mother's rooms, and she'd vowed not to summon cyclones in the White King's bath. But if the conqueror harmed her family or her home, she'd make him sorry. Her eyes narrowed, and she felt a familiar electric jolt of energy down to her soles.

Outside, the wind picked up speed.

\* \* \*

Wynter frowned. The storm had come from nowhere, quick and violent. The sky overhead had gone dark as slate. Gusting wind howled through winding cobbled lanes and between stone buildings, rattling thick glass windows in their panes. All along the King's Path, the cobbled road that corkscrewed up the palace mount, live oaks and citrus trees battered their brittle, winter-slain branches against the ancient stone walls. Without further warning, the dark clouds opened the floodgates. Rain pelted down, first in painful, stinging drops, then torrential sheets. The Summerlea steward escorting him leapt for the shelter of a covered walkway nearby.

Wynter turned his face up and squinted at the storm-darkened sky. Cold rain sluiced down his cheeks, saturating his hair and soaking the padded tunic he wore beneath his armor. Beside him, Valik, his ever-loyal friend and steward, stood still and watchful, equally as impervious to the downpour.

"There is a weather mage at work," Wynter said. "A strong one."

"Aye." Valik put a gauntleted hand on his sword hilt. "Ill intent?" As usual in the company of foreigners, the steward's clipped speech was trimmed down to the fewest possible words.

"Just a warning, I think." The dark clouds overhead were capable of deadly hail and

lightning and even cyclones, but Wynter could sense none of that in the roiling sky.

“Coruscate?”

“I doubt it. If King Verdán wielded this kind of power, we’d have seen it long before now on the battlefield. He’s never been able to summon more than a short-lived heat wave in my presence.”

“Princess?” Weather-gifts were the purview of royal houses, and strong weather-gifts rarely passed outside the direct royal line.

“Possibly.” Wynter almost smiled at the thought. “That would certainly make thing interesting wouldn’t it?”

Valik cast him a flat, emotionless look.

He returned a savage grin and gave a grunt of dark laughter that sounded more like a snow-wolf’s warning growl. The brief, sharp-edged humor faded as quickly as it had come, and Wynter turned his attention back to the storm. Knowing what was coming, Valik and the rest of the Wintercraig men stepped back to give their king room.

“Well, princess,” Wynter murmured, “let’s see what you’re made of.”

He opened the source of his magic and drew power into his body. His vision went hazy white and began to whirl, as if a blizzard blew in the depths of his eyes. Power pushed against the edges of his control, seeking release. He squeezed his eyes shut to keep it caged.

The air around him began to spin, slowly at first and then with increasing speed, capturing the falling rain so that not a single drop touched him. Behind his closed lids, he could see the vortex begin to flash and spark. A crackling sound filled his ears—rain freezing in midair, exploding into brittle, porous ice crystals that showered down upon the ground.

He spread his arms, gauntleted palms facing up. The vortex grew wider still, and faster, until it was a howling wind that drowned out the storm's raucous fury. He held the vortex for several seconds, feeding it power, nowhere near enough to approach his full, lethal strength, but enough nonetheless to make his capabilities known. Enough to make the weather witch yelp. He threw his arms up over his head, jerked his head back and opened his eyes.

Concentrated power, surrounded by whirling wind and ice, shot skyward in a column of blazing light and plowed into the heart of the storm overhead. Lighting exploded across the sky, sending frightened onlookers rushing for cover. Rain froze in midair and shattered, sending a blizzard of ice crystals raining down upon the city.

He felt the weather mage's breathless shock, tasted the scent of definite feminine power and outrage on the wind. And, to his pleasure, a hint of fear. Good. The precocious princess has probably never met her match. Until now.

She would learn, as her father had learned, that the Winter King was no spineless pampered weakling to be threatened without a care. She would learn, as her brother would learn if the coward ever dared return to face the man he'd wronged, that the wild, impetuous tempest of summer was no match for the hard, relentless dominion of winter.

The first lesson had been given—and received. He felt the Summerlander witch withdraw from the sky. The wind fell silent and, aided by Wynter's magic, the raging storm dissipated as quickly as it had formed, towering black storm clouds melting into thick swaths of winter-gray. In the ensuing calm, snow fell in large, soft flakes to blanket the ground below.

Wynter turned to the cowering Summerlea steward. The man's black eyes held raw

fear now, and his bronzed skin had assumed a sickly grayish-green cast. Good. Nothing birthed respect and acquiescence faster than fear.

“You may continue the tour,” the Winter King said.

With visible effort, the steward gathered his composure. He straightened the long, folds of his burgundy wool and velvet robes and ran trembling hands through his perfumed hair, smoothing the shoulder-length black curls back into some semblance of order.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he said when he was done, his tone filled with a new, much warier respect. “This way, please.” Sweeping one voluminously-sleeved arm out before him to indicate that Wynter should precede him, the steward resumed the tour of the palace and city defenses.

As they turned the corner, Wynter glanced back up the road behind, to the upper bailey and ancient keep crowing the city mount. Which one, he wondered. Which one of King Verdan’s three lovely, headstrong daughters had thrown down the gauntlet?

\* \* \*

Khamsin leaned against the wall, clutching her chest and breathing hard. For the second time today, she’d felt the hard edge of the Winter King’s power. Icy, fierce, instantly identifiable, it had plowed into her like a fist to the belly, driving the air from her lungs and sending her staggering backwards to slam into the stone wall. Her ears were still ringing, and the lump at the back of her head made her hiss when she ran inspecting fingertips over it.

Summer sun! She’d never known anyone besides herself capable of generating such concentrated fury in the skies.

She pushed off the wall, winced at the stab of pain from the swan’s egg on her skull,



and headed down the servants' hall toward the tower at an uncharacteristically restrained pace. No more confrontations for her today. She would purloin a servant's gown from the laundry, then sneak into the tower, gather up the dearest of her mother's possessions, and flee back to the sanctuary of her own room.

For once, she was actually glad her father hadn't summoned her to join the family. No doubt the Winter King would be dining with them tonight, and after two run-ins with him, she would be happy to spend the rest of her life avoiding a third.