

A Crown of Snow and Ice

The Wedding

I had planned to travel down to the port to meet the ship, but Queen Camille—my soon to be mother-in-law—needed me for some last minute wedding issues, so I stood on the palace steps to wave goodbye to the others instead. My betrothed sent me a desperate look from astride his horse in the palace courtyard, and Giselle snorted at him as she opened the carriage door.

“Don’t look to her for sympathy, Oliver. Or last-minute rescue. She’s loving this.” She shot me an accusatory look. “Aren’t you, Celine. Just admit it.”

“I admit nothing.” I laughed and sent her a wink when Oliver turned away.

“I’m sure Celine would rather go down to meet her family than stay here for yet more planning, Giselle,” said Emmeline nudging her sister to hurry up and climb in.

“And miss the chance to have us overwhelmed by Lanoverians without her there to soften the blow?” Giselle shook her head. “Don’t forget what her arrival in Eldon was like. I’m sure she thinks we deserve exactly what we’re getting.”

I laughed again. “They’re not so bad, Giselle, really. I promise.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’re not.” She wrinkled her nose as she finally climbed the single step into the carriage. As Emmeline followed her, she stuck her head out a window. “It’s just that there are so *many* of them!”

I shook my head. “You say that, but poor Cassian and Celeste couldn’t even come.”

Giselle shuddered in mock dramatics. “Seven Celines. Can you even imagine, Emmeline?”

This time it was Oliver who barked the laugh. “No kingdom could survive that, Giselle. Thankfully siblings can be quite different from each other. You of all people should know that.” He glanced between his two sisters who somehow managed to be best friends despite their many differences.

Giselle just grinned at him before Emmeline pulled her back into the carriage. As I waved them off, I wished I could go with them—even if Giselle’s words were partly true. I could only imagine the effect my family would have, bursting on them all at once like that.

But even though summer was drawing to a close, Eldon was still recovering from its recent curse, and I had the unique capacity to assist when conditions proved colder than expected. Queen Camille emerged from the palace to join me on the short ride down to the fields below the palace.

Apparently the ride would allow us to iron out some wrinkles in the seating arrangements for the formal meal the evening before the wedding. I had thought we already had the plans finalized, but in the queen’s defense, there were a very large number of visiting royals, so it was a rather ticklish business.

Oliver had laughed when he heard what was in store for my day, which is why I had no

sympathy for him now. He claimed his mother had worked me out and knew to tackle the most boring tasks while I was trapped on the back of a horse.

At least we had it sorted out by the time we reached our destination. The florist almost cried in relief at the sight of us, and I soon had the ground warmed, driving out the lingering cold which threatened her crop of flowers. Most of them had been ordered in advance for the wedding, so I had a vested interest in the task.

Ever since the weather began to warm, the kingdom had been scrambling to plant whatever crops it could, although we would still need to purchase supplies to see us through winter. Hopefully by next winter our own production would be back on track, though, and we might even have a surplus to trade. I knew Marin—who had no fields of their own—would be glad if we did.

Only quick-growing, hardy crops had been attempted this year, so none of the other farmers had need of my unnatural warmth—although I had been a frequent visitor while they were planting.

As we made our way back to the palace, I struggled to keep my horse to the sedate pace favored by the queen. I longed to spur him into a gallop. Would my family have arrived yet? I wanted to be there to greet them and see their initial reaction to Oliver's palace, which appeared at first glance to be made from ice.

Of course, I'd now seen a true Palace of Ice, and there were a few crucial differences—comfort being high on the list. I had attempted to describe it all to my family, but no letter could do justice to the reality.

And it had been far too long since I had seen them all. It had been well over a year since I sailed from Lanover, and even then, they hadn't all been there to see me off. Only Frederic and Cassian and their wives lived in Lanover now.

The only shadow on my excitement was Celeste's absence. Cassian and Tillie I had seen in Palinar at the twins' joint wedding, but I hadn't seen Celeste for what felt like forever. I was holding out hope that she would visit as soon as the rest of them returned, however. With so many royals absent from the Four Kingdoms at the same time, I was hardly surprised that she wanted to stay behind and make sure no trouble came while they were gone.

By the time we finally caught sight of the palace, I was nearly bursting with impatience. We had come in on a side road, and I strained my eyes for signs of the long line of carriages needed to bring them all up from the coast. Was that...?

"Oh, go on, Celine," said Queen Camille with a smile. "You've been very patient with me."

I gave her a wry smile, aware that patience was no strength of mine. No doubt she had been aware of my frustration the whole way. But when she waved me on, I didn't protest, signaling my mount to break into a faster pace.

I clattered through the gates and slid from the horse's back, straight into the arms of my sister-in-law, Evie. She was going to be one of my wedding attendants—along with my closest sister, Cordelia—and I had been dying to see them both.

I caught sight of something over Evie's shoulder and pulled back, my eyes wide.

"Is that Leo? Look how huge he is!" The sturdy toddler on my brother Frederic's

shoulders could only be Evie's son—my nephew, and the one-day heir to Lanover. I knew he would have grown since my departure—he had only been a small baby then, after all—but it was still a shock. “And I suppose Luca looks much the same these days. He was only a newborn when Cassian and Tillie brought him over for Lily and Sophie's wedding.”

Evie groaned. “Those two are thick as thieves and up to any mischief they can possibly manage. It feels like half the palace staff spend their day pulling them out of places they're not supposed to be.” She patted her slightly bulging stomach. “I'm just hoping this next one is a girl. A nice quiet girl.”

“Oh! Congratulations!” I exclaimed, giving her another hug as Frederic wandered over to us.

“You only say that, Evie, because you didn't know Celine as a toddler. Being a girl gives us no guarantees.”

“No.” I elbowed him lightly in the side. “For that you need your godmother to give you the gift of *responsibility*, hey, Frederic.” I grinned up at him. “I may not have been alive back then, but I can just imagine what a boring child you must have been.”

“Oh, he wasn't so bad, really,” said Clarisse. “At least not from what I remember.”

I turned to embrace my oldest sister. I had only been eleven when she left home for her first marriage, so I didn't have the same connection with her that I had with Celeste and Cordelia, but I had still been glad to hear she was coming. I hadn't seen her since she had visited Lanover for her twin Cassian's wedding nearly four years ago, bringing her new husband—a Rangmeran earl—with her.

Which meant I also hadn't met my two-year-old niece, Isabella. I had heard about Clarisse's second pregnancy, though, given it was more advanced than Evie's, so I had been extra touched to hear she was making the journey to Eldon.

“I'm sure things got a great deal more interesting once you turned up on the scene, Clarisse,” I said. “Given you received the far more valuable gift of courage. You no doubt instigated every bit of trouble you older three ever got into.” I got a good look at her for the first time and blinked.

“Gracious! I think you're going to have to stay and have that baby here.”

She smiled and patted her protruding stomach. “Yes, I think I just might. I hope you don't mind having us.”

“No, of course not.” Her words reminded me of my duty as host, and I turned to survey the milling crowd.

Several of them kept shooting amazed glances at the palace and the city behind it, rising up the steep slope of the mountain. But several others appeared to be darting in and out among the horses, servants, and piles of baggage.

Only my parents had made it to the palace door where King Leopold appeared to have engaged them in earnest conversation. The hubbub of voices filled the courtyard, large as it was, and it took me a moment to find my new family in the midst of the chaos. A smile spread across my face when I eventually located Oliver, Emmeline, and Giselle where they hung back near the gate, three nearly identical expressions of confusion on their faces.

Had they worked out who anyone was yet? I gestured them all forward, and Oliver was

the first to respond, Giselle not far behind him.

While they approached, I turned back to the rest of the crowd. “Welcome to Eldon everyone!” I called over the noise, and at least half of my family looked my way. I took that as a good sign and continued. “We’ll have you all shown to your rooms, but then I hope you’ll join me in my personal sitting room before the evening meal. I want to hear as much news as possible.”

Enough nods were scattered among the crowd that I decided I had made enough of an effort. Turning back to those nearest me, I beckoned Emmeline forward and introduced her to Clarisse.

“Can you show Clarisse and Charles and little Isabella to their rooms, Emmeline?” Clarisse had always been the most sensible of us girls, and I hoped she and the elder Eldonian princess would get along.

Giselle I introduced to Rafe and Marie and their three-year-old son, Benjamin. Rafe had a sense of mischief that Giselle would appreciate.

“I can see the family resemblance,” said Oliver in my ear, slipping an arm around my waist.

I smiled up at him. “The Lanoverian royal family has always been known for its beauty.”

“Well I hope they don’t mind that we’ve stolen the most beautiful of their princesses away.” He tightened his arm slightly.

I reached up to pat the side of his face. “Now I remember why I keep you around.” I shook my head. “But you’re only saying that because Celeste couldn’t come. Even I can’t compete with a godmother’s gift of great beauty.”

I ignored the small part of me that was glad to know I wouldn’t be outshone by my sister on my wedding day. One day I would be queen of Eldon, and I needed to put such selfish thoughts behind me. Particularly since, if given the choice, I would have chosen to have my sister present despite her excessive good looks.

My eye was caught on a sudden movement to one side of us, and I turned from him abruptly.

“Cordelia! There you are!”

She turned around, a squirming mass in her arms. She appeared to have just scooped the small child from inside a large trunk.

“Celine!” She dropped the boy who landed on his feet and attempted an escape, only to be swept up by Cordelia’s husband, Ferdy.

Heedless of her young family, Cordelia rushed over to throw her arms around me. “I can’t believe it’s been nearly two years since I’ve seen you!”

“I can if that’s one of the twins!” I said, watching the boy who had calmed somewhat in his father’s arms. I had visited Northhelm for their birth, and again for their first birthday, but they would be three in only a few months. “Please tell me you’re not pregnant again, too.”

Cordelia gave me a look. “With these two terrors on my hands? Hardly!”

I linked my arm through hers. “Come on! I’ll show you your rooms.” I glanced back over my shoulder. “Oliver, can you help Frederic and Evie? I’m sure you and my brother will have all sorts of things to talk about—both being heirs to the throne and all that.”

My betrothed rolled his eyes at me affectionately but turned graciously toward my brother. Ferdy—Andrew still clutched firmly in his arms—followed Cordelia and me. A harassed looking nanny followed, her grip tight around Arabella's hand.

We looked in briefly at their rooms, where Cordelia gave some orders about the disposal of their possessions, and then I dragged them all off to my sitting room. The rest of my siblings soon joined us, my parents also having found their way there, somehow.

“So they're just as boisterous as ever?” I asked Cordelia with a proud grin, watching as my twin niece and nephew scuttled off to a far corner to huddle with a slightly older looking boy.

“Only Benjamin surpasses them,” said Cordelia with a shake of her head, her eyes on the three of them. “Which is to be expected of Rafe's son. And of course Rafe himself encourages them all shamelessly.”

“You're only young once,” said a smiling voice behind me before my youngest brother enveloped me in a hug. “Congratulations, baby sis.”

I squeezed him back before stepping free. “I take it Marie is also not pregnant again? Or Celeste back home? You should start asking yourself why none of the three of you in Northhelm seem willing to try another pregnancy, Rafe. You're frightening them all.”

Rafe chuckled. “Marie's just scared she'll get twins after seeing poor Cordelia.”

Both twins looked up at his words, although they couldn't have heard him across the room, pinning me with matching mischievous smiles.

“Goodness.” I drew a breath. “It only gets more startling every time.” The two—while not identical, of course—looked remarkably similar. They had each inherited only a single feature from their northern father—shockingly blue eyes. Against their golden-skin and darker coloring, the blue stood out incredibly.

I shook my head. “You always wanted to stand out among us, Cordelia. And there's no doubt you've achieved it with your children at least.”

Cordelia sighed. “I promise you, having twins was not what I had in mind. Thank goodness Ferdy just might be the most patient man alive.”

“Hey!” said Rafe, but neither of us even bothered to respond to that.

“What about Danielle?” I asked. Celeste and William's only daughter wasn't much younger than the twins. “Does she join in their mischief?”

“Sometimes,” said Marie, wandering over to join us. “And woe to us all when she does. She's worse than Rafe when it comes to encouraging them.”

Her husband slipped his arms around her waist from behind, not even bothering to look offended.

“Oh, really?” I grinned. “A trouble-maker, is she?”

Marie shook her head. “Not that so much.” Her eyes lingered affectionately on her son. “The other three have enough mischief between them. But she seems to have inherited her mother's intelligence. And it turns out that a mind like that in a two-year-old...when combined with the madness that is the other three...”

I shuddered. “I suppose I should be glad she didn't come then.”

“It would have been nice to all be together again,” said my mother, a little wistfully.

I leaned down to where she sat beside my father on a comfortable sofa and kissed her cheek. “Welcome, Mother. It’s good to see you.”

“And you, Celine my dear. And even more lovely to meet your Oliver properly. Such a charming boy.”

I smiled, meeting his eyes across the room. “I’m glad you’re all getting the chance to get to know each other. He was a little afraid you would withhold your consent or something, I think.”

“Ha!” Rafe shook his head. “And miss out on the opportunity to be rid of you for good? Not a chance.” He winked at me. “Mother’s been enjoying the peace and quiet since you left far too much.”

“Don’t listen to him, my dear,” said my mother with complete placidity.

“I never do.” I grinned at her.

“Yes, that was always the problem,” muttered Frederic, wandering over from another sofa where he had left his young son safely ensconced with Evie beside him, a bright picture book between them.

“Now, now, children.” My mother still looked completely unperturbed, and I couldn’t help grinning again.

I had tried so many times to shock her when I was younger. But while she always stood firm in opposition to my various outrageous schemes, she wasn’t the sort to become discomposed. Which is why I had sworn Oliver and his sisters to secrecy about one part of our recent adventures. I was just waiting for the right moment to break it to them all.

“Dear Cassian and Tillie send their congratulations, of course,” she added. “They would have loved to come, but someone had to stay behind to oversee things.”

“Fortunate Cassian! After all these years his moment has come.” I shook my head at my older brother who had always taken after our mother. “You better hope you don’t return to find he’s executed a coup and usurped you, Frederic.”

Frederic just shook his head back at me, a small smile lingering around his mouth.

“Not much hope of that,” said Clarisse from several steps away. “Not when his Christening gift was loyalty.”

“Speaking of godmother gifts,” I said as casually as I could. “It turns out our godmother had a gift for me, after all.”

“Oh?” Cordelia turned wide eyes on me. She and I had originally missed out, no one wanting to risk Christening gifts for the youngest two after the disaster of Celeste’s Christening.

“You got that golden ball, at least,” I reminded her. Even if it had come from Celeste rather than directly from a godmother. “Not a very exciting gift, but it was something.”

“Hey, don’t insult it.” She smiled over at her husband who was keeping a careful eye on the three children in the corner. “It brought me Ferdy, after all.”

“Well, I’m happy to say I got something a little more exciting.”

“Don’t keep us all in suspense,” said Frederic dryly.

“I just thought it was starting to get a little dark in here,” I said, all innocence.

Marie started to speak—no doubt to ask what that had to do with anything—when I

pointed my finger across the room at the nearest candelabra. A tiny fireball flew across the space and engulfed the candles. They all began to burn brightly.

“What?”

“Whoa!”

“Celine!”

The room erupted into mingled exclamations and gasps. All the children looked up in amazement, Isabella even emerging from her mother’s skirts and joining the three older ones as they rushed over to me.

“Auntie Celine! Auntie Celine!” they clamored. “Do it again! Do it again!”

When the chaos subsided a little, my mother spoke from her place on the sofa. “You always were a fiery one, Celine.”

I couldn’t resist a wry grin directed at myself. I should have known. Even if she had been shocked, it had passed quickly.

I avoided Oliver’s eyes from where he grinned at me from one side of the now-lit candles. He knew I had been wanting to shock them all and had found it amusing. But then he didn’t know what it was like to be the youngest of seven.

My siblings, at least, showed suitable astonishment, and it took some time to tell them the full story. Long enough that we had to leave for the evening meal by the time I had finished. But I promised my eager nieces and nephews a proper demonstration the next morning. Outside.

“You know they’ll be calling their own godmother now and begging her to give them something equally dramatic,” said Cordelia as we made our way through the palace.

I grinned. “Then it’s a good thing the godmothers don’t give gifts on demand.”

“That it is,” said Marie, a slightly dazed look on her face as she no doubt contemplated her three-year-old son with such a gift.

“It’s actually much weaker than it used to be,” I said.

“Really?” Evie sidled up to us to join the conversation. “What could you do before?”

I shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. “Create giant fireballs or ongoing streams of fire. Plus huge, gale-force hot winds.”

“Not in that dress, I hope,” said Evie with a shudder. I was wearing a particularly elegant creation of hers that I had brought with me from Lanover.

“I’ll admit I’ve ruined a couple of dresses since I came here,” I said with a sigh. “But I’m very controlled these days.”

“So why is it weaker?” Marie looked intrigued.

“At first I thought I might be losing it,” I confessed. “But we’ve done a fair amount of experimentation, and it seems to get stronger or weaker in reverse correlation to the general temperature. Now that summer is drawing to a close, it will start to get stronger again as it gets colder.”

“How very practical,” said Marie with apparent approval.

I nodded. “I might have overheated over summer, otherwise. The gift keeps me toasty inside.”

I grinned as Cordelia shook her head in wonder.

“Charles seems to have grown a bit more comfortable around us,” I said, dropping my voice as I nodded at Clarisse’s husband walking just ahead.

But apparently he had good hearing because he turned and spoke over his shoulder.

“Thank you, Celine. And you seem far less terrifying than I seem to remember.”

The twinkle in his eyes made me smile. “Well, some of us do grow up, you know.”

Rafe snorted before lunging down the corridor after Benjamin who had made a run for it.

“To be honest, I’m surprised Clarisse didn’t reject you out of hand when she found out your name started with a C,” I said to Charles. “We have a few too many C names in the family already.”

“It was certainly a count against me,” he said gravely. “But I won her over in the end.” His eyes still twinkled. “And then she insisted we name our girl Isabella after Cordelia here already had an Arabella, so I decided she couldn’t complain. And that we’d better nickname her Izzy.”

Cordelia looked a little guilty. “Well, given I chose Arabella and Andrew, I can’t complain either. I’m not quite sure what came over me, actually.”

“I’ll forgive you both,” I said, “as long as we have no more Bellas, and you refrain from giving your next one an A name, Cordelia.”

“If there is a next one,” she muttered as the twins both broke free of their father’s hold in what was clearly a concerted move. She hurried off to help him while Evie watched in sympathy, a squirming Leo on her hip.

“Don’t look too smug,” said Evie as we neared the dining hall. “You’ll blink and this will be you.”

Frederic put an arm around her shoulders. “And I can only imagine what your children will be like, Celine.” He grinned across at my betrothed. “It’s not too late to back out, Oliver.”

My eyes flew to his face to see how he took my family’s teasing, but he was grinning back at my brother.

“Don’t worry, I know what I’ve signed up for.” He took my hand and squeezed it. “And the wedding can’t come soon enough for me.”

I leaned my head briefly against his shoulder. I liked this. Being around my family while I had Oliver with me. The remaining week before the wedding couldn’t pass quickly enough for me either.

When the morning of the wedding finally arrived, my six attendants—Emmeline, Giselle, Lily, Sophie, Cordelia, and Evie—gathered in my chambers to help me prepare. Evie—a genius seamstress before she married my brother—had designed my dress and sent it from Lanover. And she had also insisted on putting the final touches on it herself after she arrived.

Which naturally meant it fit me perfectly and looked incredible. The creamy ivory silk made my golden skin glow, and the simplicity of the design was complemented by the breathtaking train.

Several maids joined us, helping me to ease into the beautiful creation. Everyone exclaimed when the endless buttons had all been fastened, and one of the maids even looked teary.

“It’s perfect,” she whispered.

I nodded fervently, regarding myself in the mirror. “Of course it is. Evie made it.”

“It’s just such a pity about the flowers,” the girl added.

“Wait, what?” I spun around to stare at her.

“For your bouquet.” She regarded me wide-eyed. “You didn’t hear?” She looked around a little wildly. “I’m not sure it’s my place...”

My eyes narrowed. “Tell me.”

She twisted her hands together. “The florist picked all the flowers for the arrangements yesterday, but she was waiting to do your bouquet this morning. So it would be fresh. And there was an unexpected frost overnight. So all those beautiful roses...”

I sucked in a breath. The florist and I had made plans for a huge trailing bouquet of deep red roses. It would have looked incredible against the ivory of the gown.

Lily, looking a little dismayed, hurried forward and ushered the maid away. “You never bother the bride with problems,” she whispered to her.

“Not until you’ve fixed them, anyway,” finished Sophie.

I turned to look back in the mirror, a little wistfully this time. I would still look amazing without flowers. Then I remembered that I had also been going to have red rosebuds woven through my hair—which had yet to be piled on my head—and I felt another pang.

Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself that flowers were a small thing to worry over when I was about to marry the prince I had always dreamed of finding. The thought of Oliver’s face calmed me instantly. How long the weeks had seemed while we waited for all the plans to be made and all the guests to gather. And the day had finally arrived. I refused to let anything ruin it.

I took another deep breath. Everyone seemed to be giving me space to absorb the news. Did they think I was going to explode? I hoped they all knew me better.

The sound of the door made me glance over, expecting to see the poor maid being sent away. But instead it was Emmeline coming in. I hadn’t even noticed her leaving.

My eyes immediately fastened on her hands. Or rather what was clutched in them.

“Is that a...”

“Bouquet, yes.” She gave me a small smile. “The twins are right. You never worry the bride with a problem until you’ve fixed it. I thought I’d pop out and check, and the florist just finished with this.”

I hurried over to meet her in the middle of the room. The bouquet was nothing like the one I had planned, a mix of colors and flowers arranged in a much more natural and wild way. But it worked. The pinks and purples and blues tumbled over each other, combined with deep green leaves in a way that somehow created an elegant whole.

“They’re from the meadow, aren’t they?” I asked her quietly.

She smiled up at me and nodded. “Giselle told me how Oliver helped you train there. And how much you loved it. And it always seemed so protected from the weather in that little

pocket of the mountains. When I heard what had happened to your roses, I thought it was worth sending someone up there to see what they could pick. I thought...well, I hoped it might be an acceptable substitute for you."

"Acceptable?" I embraced her, carefully avoiding crushing the bouquet. "It's beautiful. And so incredibly thoughtful. I love it, Emmeline. I truly do."

She turned slightly pink. "I know I can be a bit boring sometimes. Compared to you and Giselle, anyway. But I am good with details. And making sure everything is done as properly as I can manage."

I gave her an extra squeeze before pulling back. "There's no one more perfect to have around for a wedding." I paused. "I hope you don't feel like I..." I let the words trail away, not quite sure how to finish the sentiment.

"Oh no, it's all right," she said hurriedly. "I know you and Giselle are more alike than you and me. And that you had all those shared adventures up on the mountain. I just hope...well, I hope you and I can grow to be as good friends as Giselle and I are."

I smiled at her, my eyes misting a little. "I'm quite sure we will."

Evie and Cordelia came over to embrace me and exclaim over the beautiful replacement bouquet, and I surreptitiously wiped at my eyes. I didn't want to look red and puffy for my big moment.

But Emmeline's words had touched me. Extra warmth filled me at the thought that I had these two new sisters to stay with me when my own had to leave again in the all-too-near future. For the first time in weeks, I had to make sure I didn't spontaneously combust. I had been letting my discipline grow lax in the warmer months with my fire dulled to a dim burn.

I shook myself and straightened. Time to get back in control before the weather cooled and I ended up burning half the palace down.

But when I walked down the long red velvet aisle, my eyes fixed on my groom, I was fervently grateful that the weather hadn't turned yet. Because the warmth that rushed through me at the sight of him only grew as we said our vows, our hands firmly clasped. And when they declared us married, and he pressed his lips against mine, I could feel the heat rushing through me into him.

If it had been the dead of winter, I might have exploded the room. I only had so much self-control, after all, and I was too full of bursting love to waste a thought on anything but Oliver and how supremely happy this day had made me.