

Title: The Winter Heir

Series: Fractured Kingdoms, Book 2

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Excerpt:

Chapter 1

Winter had arrived in the kingdom of Telridge, bending all who dwelled there to its capricious whim. And as Spense Ferrous well knew, winter was an unforgiving sovereign.

During the dark season, it was as if King Lumine himself stretched his icy hand from his throne deep in the White Rock Mountains all the way to the human kingdoms, pummeling the leaded windows of The Academy library with insistent sleet. Tap-tapping his impatience. His displeasure.

Spense scowled at the darkening sky, and defiantly returned to his studies in The Academy's oldest tower. He placed his trust in the human-built stone walls that protected the collection of ancient wisdom from the Winter King's sneak-thief wind and angry blizzard. Spense was thankful that Dean Stone had granted him permission to use the library, though he was still too young to become a proper student. He wouldn't waste this opportunity, no matter how tired or numb he became.

So he uncurled his chilled fingers and turned the next page and the next, poring over stacks of moldering books. The one in front of him smelled of overripe orange, as if a doddering scholar had spilled his marmalade on its pages and left it there to infuse the words with wise, pungent knowledge. So far, he'd experienced plenty of the aroma, but none of the wisdom.

He was sure it was there, the knowledge to appease King Lumine, to break his bargain, and free Dewy. She'd once been Lady Dew Drop, Fae royalty of the Summer faeries, not a prisoner of the Winter Court. She could return to her proper place if Spense found the answer to King Lumine's problem, if he found the missing Heir.

But it had been months, and he was no closer than when he started. All the while, Dewy endured amongst the Winter Fae. He knew the creeping chill of that court, the frosty despair that had ensnared his vulnerable human heart in the few days he'd been a guest in The Silver Horn. Would the bloom of Summer submit—as all things must—and shrivel in the face of the cold?

Spense squeezed his eyes shut, but his thoughts were too persistent, and his temples throbbed. He laid his head on the book, closed his eyes and remembered Dewy's sun-kissed face the last time he'd seen her. It was the day he'd been none-too-gently thrown out of the Winter Court. Face first in the snow. The day he'd started on this impossible search.

He groaned, pushed back from the table and slammed the useless book closed. Bits of dust flew off along with something crusty and orange. Three tables down, two Academy students halted their whispered conversation, grabbed their own books, and scurried away.

This was the reaction he was getting around the castle these days. Sidelong glances, and awed, skittish retreats. Once, before he'd met Dewy, he'd been the easily ignored, illegitimate son of King Ferrous and Cait the Head Cook. Now, he was the "young mage who had saved the kingdom."

Only it was a lie. It was Dewy who had done the saving, and she was paying the price.

Footsteps echoed along the lanes of The Academy library. Heavy, precise, military footsteps, followed by a rumbling baritone.

"Little brother? Are you in here?"

Spense sighed. "Here. Back wall."

"There you are!" Dirk planted himself at the end of the row. "Still at it? Sweet Spring! When was the last time you took a break?"

Spense gestured futilely at the text in front of him and the piles beyond it. "I can't."

"Yes, you can." Dirk clamped two strong hands around Spense's arms and removed him from his slumped position. He looked him in the eye. "And you should. You're not going to get anywhere if you're too exhausted to think. All this studying makes a man addled. And I had thought we'd cured you of that. Have you even eaten today?"

Spense shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Think about where Dewy is."

Dirk folded his arms over his broad chest. "She's among the faeries, Spense. Her own kind."

Spense shook his head. "You don't understand..."

"She's a prisoner, Spense. I know she's not lounging on one of the Brecken Isles. But she's not dying."

"You can't know that."

Dirk frowned, wrinkling his chin, the one physical characteristic he and Spense shared. "No, but I can make an educated guess. And I'm guessing that it is in King Lumine's best interests to keep her alive and you working. How else does he get what he wants?"

Spense mashed his lips together.

“See? You’ve got no argument.”

“Maybe I’m just tired and hungry and can’t come up with one.”

“That is exactly why you need a break. And I happen to have the perfect opportunity to get you out of this drafty library.”

Dirk was probably right. Not eating. Not sleeping. Days and nights in the library weren’t doing any good. Spense rubbed his dry, overworked eyes. He sighed.

“What is it?”

“There happens to be a little...party.”

Spense scowled as he reluctantly rose from the desk and took a step back from his piles of books.

“I’ll eat, but I’m not really in the mood for a party.”

Dirk rotated Spense around and gave him a small shove. “You’re going. There’s this thing called a Solstice. You may have heard of it.”

Spense rolled his eyes. “Yes, and it is not for another night.”

“All the more reason to get started now. Solstice Eve, as it were. Must celebrate properly, and all the pomp of tomorrow night is hardly proper.” Dirk slung his arm over Spense’s shoulders. “This is our opportunity to actually enjoy the holiday, to celebrate with actual friends, for drinking ale, not weak wine.”

Spense couldn’t imagine enjoying any of the Solstice this year, but he agreed with Dirk about the official royal celebrations. Even on a good year, the ceremonial aspects tended to sour the holiday. But Dirk was Crown Prince and Commander of the Knights. He had responsibilities Spense had never had to worry about. All eyes would be on his brother—many of them eligible young ladies and their ambitious parents. The least he could do was join Dirk on his one night off. And maybe he needed it, too. He could always return tomorrow with fresh eyes.

“So, debauchery?” Spense asked.

Dirk lifted a corner of his mouth. “Wicked Winter, yes.” He squeezed Spense’s neck tighter.

“Maybe even for you!”

“Hmm...” Spense grumbled.

“Come down. Drink with my Knights. By some miracle, you’ve earned their respect.”

“Fine.”

Spense had earned the Knights’ respect and his brother’s friendship. And those weren’t things to squander. A year before, it would have been unheard of for Dirk to be seen socializing—in public—with his younger, bookish, skinny half-sibling. But that was before. Before the attacks from Verden and the Winter faeries. Before they’d worked together—as brothers—to defend

their kingdom. And before Dewy had sacrificed everything to save him and the people of Telridge, whether they knew the full story or not.

“Give me a few more minutes, just to get these books put away, and I’ll be right behind you. Grey Goats Tavern?”

“Where else?” Dirk clapped him on the shoulder. “Hurry up. If you’re not there in fifteen minutes, I am sending Lady Xendra up to fetch you, and you know how pissy she gets when you interrupt her drinking.”

With a loud clap, Spense closed the book he held, sending up a puff of dust. He choked and nodded, even as his eyes watered. He had no interest in getting on the Knights’ bad side. No one with any sense would. As Dirk left the library, Spense pivoted to the table he’d occupied for the last several hours and stacked his books. It took three trips to deliver all of them to The Academy library’s return desk. The clerk had long since left.

A thin green book he didn’t remember requesting was on top of the last pile. He lifted the volume and turned the cover to see the title. Truth Tellers was lightly embossed on the front. Spense flipped the worn pages. Each section described the four Oracles of the Fae, one for each season. He paused on an illustration of Winter’s Oracle.

His heart rate picked up as he scanned the chapter. He had spent hours poring over chronologies and books of human magic, trying to determine a way to find Lumine’s Heir and release Dewy. But maybe he’d been going about it all wrong. Why had he never considered omens? The gift of Sight was his father’s skill, not his, but he should have thought of it. And wouldn’t a Fae Oracle be stronger than even his skilled father? At least for finding a lost Fae?

Spense snapped the book shut and raced out of the library.