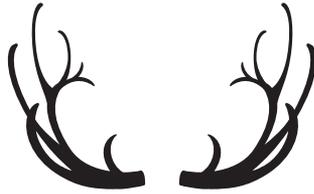


# The Winter King





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*To my mom,  
who read the story first*





## CHAPTER ONE

THE TEMPLE STOOD EMPTY AT THE edge of the village, encircled by a crown of aspens. The villagers, when they had to pass by, cast anxious glances at the carved figures arching like serpents from the eaves. Even the magpies, whose dome nests filled the crooked bows of the nearby trees, avoided the ancient structure. In the twilight, long shadows crept along the wide shingles, lingering well after daybreak. Deep within the temple, tucked away like a glowing seed in a hollow shell, was an empty wooden throne.

Cora couldn't see the temple as she crossed the crowded village square, but she could feel it.

The temple was waiting, just like the rest of them.

Tomorrow, the Winter King would return to Hrimsby, slipping into human form like a banner unfurled, and the village teemed with preparations. Cora passed hopeful merchants hawking their goods from canopied stalls, harried women buying last minute supplies, and children twirling sticks twined with green and gray ribbons, the Winter King's colors. The town spared no expense to welcome their god.

*And he doesn't care about any of it, Cora thought. He cares for nothing but himself.*

The late autumn rain had turned the village square into a squalid mess, and Cora flinched as a young boy ran past, splashing mud on the hem of her linen shift. It felt like a reprimand for her dark thoughts. Or perhaps for delaying when her mother had sent her to buy more thyme for the Winter's Feast. The early morning mists had all but disappeared. She pictured her mother hovering in High Aldorman Fyodor's kitchens, waiting and worrying.

Cora pushed her way through the crowd, narrowly dodging a bundling herd of pigs. Skirting around the stables, she hurried up the wide road toward the High Aldorman's vast stone house and her waiting mother. Her fingers tightened around the soapstone jar that held the dried herb. The jar was barely half-full, but it was all Abalone had—or

claimed to have. Hopefully it would be enough. As head cook in Fyodor's kitchens, Cora's mother was wholly responsible for the feast. The food had to be perfect; Greta's position depended on it. And without her mother's wages, their family wouldn't survive the winter.

Lost in the fears that churned like whitecaps in her mind, she didn't hear the footsteps behind her. Like everyone else, Cora kept her guard up when she walked near the woods; the flooded fens and knee-high willows were perfect hunting places for draugar, the undead. But worry smothered her caution, and she didn't realize she'd been followed until a hand gripped her arm.

Cora shrieked and spun around, throwing up her hands to protect herself. The jar slipped from her grasp and flew skyward, its polished sides glinting in the autumn sun. Cora reached for it helplessly, already knowing she was too late. Luckily, the boy behind her was a head taller and decidedly more agile. He brushed past her, his nimble fingers curling around the smooth stone and folding it to his chest.

"Peder!" Cora grabbed for the jar, but the brown-haired boy dodged her easily. One hand held the thyme above his head, the other pointed at her.

"You promised you wouldn't pass the stables without saying hello."

Cora snorted. "I made that promise years ago."

"Promises don't shrivel up and die, Cora Nikolson. I said I'd throw a cat into Abelone's sleeping quarters every time

she called you draugar-kin, and I haven't let you down yet, have I?"

Cora grimaced. "You'll need to find another cat." She was still seething from her interaction with the shopkeeper's daughter. While many of the villagers regarded Cora warily—as if her family's curse might rub off on them—Abelone seemed to revel in her former friend's descent into poverty.

Peder's smile faded. "Again?"

Cora thought of the way Abelone's eyes had lingered on the stains and patches of her overdress, and her cheeks warmed. To add to the humiliation, Cora's clothes, her hands, even her hair, reeked of onions. She shrugged. "You'd think she could find a more original insult."

Peder held out his hand. "Come back to the stables. I've got a new straw figure for you. It's got a beard like Master Abelson's."

Cora wished for the thousandth time that she could forget her duties and stay with Peder, sitting in the hay like they had as children, sharing flatbread topped with skyr and sometimes wild berries, if they were lucky enough to find any. But the Winter King had made different plans for her family, and none of them had been kind.

She shook her head. "I can't. And I need that jar now. I'm already late."

Peder's expression sobered, and his eyes moved over her face like he was examining a tapestry. Cora knew this look.

He was reading her mood, calculating how upset she was. Quickly, she let go of her skirts and arranged her face into a smile.

“I’m fine.”

Peder raised his eyebrows. “Very convincing.”

Cora sighed. “I’m not trying to convince you, I’m asking you to give me back the only thing standing between my mother and a ruined feast.”

“Oh, come now.” Peder waved a dismissive hand. “Her feasts are incredible. Everybody thinks so.”

*Not all of the feasts*, Cora thought. Because there had been one mistake. And there couldn’t be another. High Aldorman Fyodor had made that very clear. “Yes, thank the King and his eternally benevolent reign,” Cora said in a high, mocking voice.

Peder’s eyes widened, and he took her arm, pulling her close.

“Careful, Cora, the King has sharp ears.”

Cora made an intense study of the mud beneath her shoes, unwilling to meet his eyes. Peder had sworn years ago that he’d keep her safe, that he wouldn’t abandon her like the others had. *Tight as a promise, you and I*. But Cora had lived long enough to witness even the strongest promises snap under the strain of disagreement. Peder was blindly loyal to the Winter King, and on this issue, they stood on opposite banks of an impassable river. The rift in their friendship was yet another gift from their beloved ruler.

“Then he already knows how I feel,” Cora said. She pulled the jar free. “And I suppose he doesn’t care.” Cora walked away with the spice jar held close to her chest. She could feel Peder watching her until the road curved gently around a copse of trees.

As she rounded the final bend before the High Aldorman’s house, the wind picked up, carrying the sharp, salty smell of the sea. Hrimsby was surrounded by forests that stretched on three sides toward the ocean. On the fourth side, freshwater streams rushed down the mountains, splitting off like the veins on the back of her mother’s hand before disappearing into the sea. After Winter’s Day, the peddlers that crowded the market square would cross the mountains and return to the warm southern cities, before the snow on the pass isolated Hrimsby. *Before we’re trapped here*, Cora thought.

A high arch and two sturdy wooden doors marked the servants’ entrance at the High Aldorman’s house. As the chosen mediator between the god-King and his people, Fyodor lived in the largest house in Hrimsby, and almost a quarter of the villagers worked for him. Cora pushed her way inside, past maids carrying wreaths and linens and men hoisting stacks of kindling across their shoulders. The frenzy of preparations hadn’t lessened in the kitchens: knives chopping in rapid unison, servants gossiping, and her mother issuing brisk orders in the midst of it all. *She works twice as hard as everyone else*, Cora thought with a swell of pride.

Greta's eyes lit up with relief when Cora handed her the thyme. "Thank the King. I found a bit in the back of the larder, but not enough for the final seasoning. Well done, Cora Quickfoot," she said.

Cora's throat tightened. She wished her mother could see that she had grown up and out of the nickname her father gave her when she was little, running fast into his waiting arms.

Greta hurried off, and Cora warmed her hands by the fire, savoring the moment of peace. The tension in her shoulders lifted slightly. She had averted disaster; things were still under control.

"Cora!"

Edith, Greta's second cook, called to her from across the room. She was a small, efficient woman, and such a skilled baker that Fyodor had insisted she leave her husband's store and come work for him. Her ringlets, tied up in a loose bun, were a darker version of her daughter Abelone's golden ones.

"Did Abelone find the thyme?"

"Yes," Cora responded. *Did you tell your daughter that I'm cursed?* The words sat heavy on her tongue, threatening to tumble out, but she swallowed them back.

"I knew I'd saved some in the back." Edith paused and gave Cora an exasperated smile. "Why are you standing there, child? There's a mountain of pots that need scrubbing!"

Edith turned away and Cora reluctantly threw herself back into the flurry of preparations for the day she hated most of all.