

A Midwinter's Wedding

Chapter 14

Snow Fight

Ferdinand glanced over at Princess Cordelia. The delight on her face made all the work he'd put in to organise the excursion worth it. William had laughed when Ferdy suggested recreating one of their childhood snow days, but he had also acquiesced readily enough. Ferdy could only assume he was as eager to please the princess as Ferdy himself.

Why wouldn't he be, after all? Cordelia's eyes and skin glowed, her dark lips wide with laughter as she shot down the small hill, her hands tightly gripping the front of a wooden sled. She shone with life and happiness and beauty. Ferdy only wished this excursion, and the others he had planned, could make up for letting her fall through the ice.

Just the memory of the accident invoked a shiver of fear. But another memory quickly followed. The weight of her slight body in his arms as he carried her to safety. The feel of her pressed against his chest. The sound of his name on her lips. He shook his head. Such thoughts would do him no good, and he didn't deserve them.

William made a boastful comment about his sledding prowess, and Rafe responded with a laughing challenge. But Cordelia cut them off, claiming she would race William and defend Lanover's honour herself. Ferdy watched William bend close to her, their laughs mingling as he gallantly offered to pull both the sleds up the hill ready for their competition.

Ferdy forced himself to turn away, checking on the other royals who were building a giant snowman. William was everything Ferdy himself had once been but no longer was. It was right that the prince should have Cordelia. But that didn't mean Ferdy wanted to watch them together.

He was still slogging towards the others when a loud cheer went up from Rafe. A small grin tugged at Ferdy's lips. His girl had won. He stopped short. Where had that thought come from? She wasn't his girl at all.

William replied with something he couldn't hear, and he swung instinctively back towards them, trying to catch the words. But it was a snowball, not a verbal sally, that Rafe let fly in response. The expertly-packed white ball landed hard on William's chest.

Ferdy reacted instinctively, bending down to scoop up his own handful of snow. His strange new feelings of jealousy towards William didn't change his responsibilities, both as a Northhelmian, and as William's best friend, to come to his prince's defence.

His throw was true, but a deft hand snatched the snowball from the air before it could find its target on the back of Rafe's head. A slow smile spread across Hans' face as he tossed the snowball into the air, as if testing its weight. When he turned and threw it back towards Ferdinand, the movement was so quick that Ferdy didn't have time to duck.

The snow exploded across his chest, and he leaped behind a tree. It was war, then.

He used his sheltered position to form a small supply of three snowballs before peering back towards the others. Laughs and screams rang through the forest as the young royals leaped for cover or launched attacks. He waded back into the melee. In the spirit of the apparent free-for-all, he forgot about kingdom alliances and aimed for any exposed piece of body he could see. All three of his missiles found their victims, so he leaned over to quickly scoop up more snow.

Alyssa seemed to have the weakest aim, every one of her shots missing wildly. But she seemed undaunted, hiding behind Max and laughing particularly loudly whenever she successfully managed to use him as a shield. Her husband didn't seem to mind and took all the hits without complaint.

Ferdy found himself next to the two of them the next time he leaned over to collect more ammunition. Max bent down as well, but instead of forming a snowball, he swept in an entire armful of white powder, shooting back upright and dumping the load of loose snow straight onto his unsuspecting wife's head. This time it was his laugh that rang out as she squealed and tried to stop the soft ice from sliding down the back of her neck.

A moment later she gave up the attempt and launched herself at Max instead. He tried to run, but the snow hampered his movement, and she managed to tackle him. They collapsed on top of each other into the snow. Ferdy guessed from the laughter and protests that Alyssa was now shoving snow down Max's neck.

The others ignored the Arcadians, except for launching an occasional snowball in their direction, and continued to pop out from amongst the trees to take aim at each other. Queen Ava landed several of the best shots, carefully calculated throws with maximum impact. Hans had equal aim, but he shadowed his wife protectively, apparently unable to shake his history as her guard. His distraction allowed Ferdy to get his revenge, landing a couple of hard hits against the taller man.

Shortly afterwards, Ava withdrew, taking the rest of the young women with her. Only once they had collapsed into the snow, at the edge of the continuing fight, did Ferdy admit to himself that he hadn't truly been aiming randomly. Anyone who had sent a snowball in Cordelia's direction, had received a blow from one of Ferdy's missiles.

With Cordelia out of the fight, he was free to pursue a wilder strategy. He began to stalk through the trees after the distracted princes. William knew better, but Ferdy could see the foreigners underestimated him on account of his damaged legs. He could use that to his advantage.

He and William fell into a rhythm, working together to bombard Max, Rafe and Hans. The two Northhelmians had the most experience in the snow, and they were used to working as a team. They soon had the other three on the defensive.

It might have been years since Ferdy had participated in a true snowball fight, but he found it as entertaining as ever. And the three foreigners made formidable opponents, despite their inexperience. Everyone's game had improved now that the girls had left the fight—apparently he hadn't been the only one suffering from divided attention.

"If Marie were with us, we'd easily have them on the run," he said to William as they sheltered behind a large bush. The three of them had always beaten the other nobles when they were children.

"What makes you think she'd be fighting with you?" called Rafe from behind a nearby tree.

"Be glad the girls aren't still here," said Hans with a low chuckle. "Ava and I would have you all beat if it came down to a fight between the couples."

Ferdy glanced over in time to see Cordelia fall back against the snow, her arms and legs sweeping outwards as she made a snow godmother. She said something to Alyssa beside her, and the other girl laughed. Cordelia looked so vibrant against the white of the snow, more beautiful than the stunning winter landscape.

Cold ice thudded hard against the side of his head, snapping his attention back to the fight. He leapt for cover, hoping none of the royals had noticed the direction of his abstracted gaze.

He found cover behind a tree and surveyed the battlefield. Apparently William had been much more focussed. His friend had built up a large pyramid of pre-packed snowballs and was busy launching them out from behind a tree in such rapid fire that he had all three of the others pinned down.

Ferdy stepped towards the prince, intending to join him, and then remembered he still had a snowball in his hand. A much better idea occurred to him. Strolling forwards, he rounded the tree and landed his missile full in William's face.

As the prince gasped and sputtered, Ferdy pretended the satisfaction he felt at scoring the hit against his friend had nothing to do with the dark-haired princess making shapes in the snow.

Max cheered loudly and rushed forwards to steal half of William's stash. William growled and lobbed two snowballs at Max's retreating back. The other prince just laughed, and soon they were all fighting hard again, alliances forgotten in what had once again become a free-for-all.

Ferdy kept his attention strictly on the fight. He was the only non-royal present, and he couldn't let the freedom of a snowball fight give him crazy ideas. Ideas like the tiny voice in the back of his mind that suggested perhaps he, a misshapen Major, should fight to win the love of a princess.