

ORIGINAL POST: <https://www.thenovl.com/blog/2019/7/2/cover-reveal-the-winter-duke-by-claire-eliza-bartlett>

CHAPTER ONE

The night could be worse, considering. The likelihood of a public death was low.

All the same, I kept my opulent coat buttoned up, despite how my neck itched in it. The more layers I had between me and my sister Velosha, the better. Last week she'd nicked our brother Kevro's arm with a poisoned stiletto at Wintertide mass, and I wasn't about to let her try her tricks on me. "Ekata," she whispered. I pretended not to hear.

My favorite tutor said that other people's siblings were noisy, argumentative telltales. My siblings tried to murder one another.

But not this night. Tonight we had a strict no-murder policy. Tonight we had a brideshow, and the world was watching us. And nothing said get out of here like an unstable, bloodthirsty family. I should know. I'd been begging my father for the chance to leave from the moment I was old enough to take a place at a university. He'd promised that when the brideshow was finally over, I'd be free to do it. Provided I lived so long.

The brideshow candidates stood on the long, narrow balcony that ran around the Great Hall. Fifteen people who thought that marrying into our family was a good idea. Some of them giggled with one another. Some observed the floor, pointing out their delegates to the candidates next to them. More than one looked tired of waiting. A pretty girl with a dark ponytail and an emerald-and-gold riding suit covered a yawn with her hand, earning a laugh from the girl next to her. Her arms were bare, tan from the kiss of a foreign sun. A bold choice for a palace made of ice. But something about her seemed bold. When she caught me watching her, she raised an eyebrow. I rolled my eyes at the absurdity of it all. Her mouth twitched into a lazy smile.

My stomach lurched. I flushed, looking away before I could cause a scene. I wasn't there to create an international incident, and she was here for my brother, not me. Mother had sent written invitations to twenty empires, duchies, and kingdoms. Fifteen of the invitations had been answered with delegations, who now stood on the floor of the Great Hall and waited for the festivities to finally begin. Most eligible royals would be interested in a deal with Kylma Above and access to trade with the prosperous duchy Below. Kylma Below was the only source of distillable magic in the world, which meant that our cold, tiny country on a frozen lake commanded policy alongside kingdoms a hundred times our size.

Even so, it surprised me that fifteen people could be interested in Lyosha. That, more than anything, was a clear indication they'd never met him.

The restlessness was infectious. We'd been waiting for my father, mother, and brother for half an hour, and up on the royal dais, we didn't talk. I glanced back at my maid, Aino; she lifted her chin, and I did the same. Aino had never steered me wrong at a social function.

A door on the side of the Great Hall opened, but it was only Prime Minister Eirhan. He'd been prime minister longer than I'd been alive, and his oily demeanor left me with a sour taste every time I had to speak with him. That was happily rare; I preferred the study of bones and trees and the denizens Below to the study of politics.

Eirhan spoke to a guard next to the door. The guard, dressed in ceremonial silver and blue, struck his iron-tipped halberd on the ground. The guards lining the hall took up the movement, creating the iron tempo that announced my father.

The hall went dark, and whispering began. A dark hall heralded magic, for magic did not work well with fire. The candles burned low in their sconces, reflected like diamonds by the ice walls.

Light descended from above, instead, in round pearls that fell like feathers. They glittered as they drifted, shimmering blue one moment, orange the next, clumping together like the thick pollen that blew in from the mountains during what passed for summer in Kylma Above. There was a great intake of breath from the hall, and I tilted my face up to catch some of the pearls as they fell. My father was the only man in the world Above who could refine magic and control how it manifested, and it never failed to mesmerize. It was his declaration of wealth, his declaration of power, and it reminded the rest of us what magic could do, if we only had the imagination for it.

The pearls turned into flower petals, filling the air with a sweet scent. *Rosaeus brumalis*, I thought, breathing in the faint smell of winter roses, the only kind that grew here. Before they kissed our faces, they burst apart again, showering us with needled points. I covered my face with my sleeves. A few of the delegates shouted. A crack shook the palace walls, and dark wings snapped above us. An enormous eagle winged around the top of the dome, golden eyes flashing in the dark. Its cry made my ears throb, and its wingbeat nearly blew me into *Velosha*.

The eagle pulled its wings in and hurtled to the ground. Delegates stumbled out of its way, and even I, who'd seen his displays at least twice a year, flinched. With a screech, the eagle raked its talons across the floor, leaving deep gouges that would stay long after the bird had disappeared. The power of magic: It was temporary, but the effects were permanent. And only my father had the secret to it.

I hated him for that more than I hated him for other things.

The eagle launched back into the air, knocking over the nearest delegates, and sped toward the ceiling. I was certain it would slow down or disappear—but instead, it crashed through the dome. Ice shattered and plummeted toward us. We ducked again, but the ice slowed and spun, turning into snowflakes that dusted our shoulders like sugar. Wind howled through the cracked dome, but winter roses grew over the cracks, smoothing the wall; ice climbed toward the starred sky. The hole became smaller and smaller until the last of the roses knit together, leaving us with our ice dome and sealing us off from the elements once more.

Light flared. The room became golden and warm. The show was over, and the grand duke stood before us. Everyone knelt.

That was Father's grand trick for our guests. Show them the power of magic—its constructive, destructive, and transformative glory. Because magic was our most exported resource, Father wanted the wealthy delegates to imagine what they could do with it. They could impress kings. They could bring down city walls. With the correctly refined pearl, they could change the world.

My father's very presence demanded silence. I'd feared him for almost as long as I could remember. Where he walked, the air seemed thin and sparse, as if his broad shoulders and fur coat pushed it out of a room. As if it tangled in his snow-and-stone beard or got bitten off by his sharp teeth when he smiled. As if his brown eyes could pin it down.

Mother stood next to him in a dress of white doeskin. She and I shared the same pale hair and skin, the same gray eyes, the same pointed chin and nose. I hadn't managed to inherit her elegance, but I

made up for it by being less abhorrent. And on Father's other side stood Lyosha—eldest brother, heir-elect, and groom for the brideshow—who had Father's height and dark hair and pale skin, but still looked like a weasel in a coat. Unlike the rest of us, he wore the brown-and-white wool that was spun from the shaggy goats we kept at the base of the mountains, eschewing the bright colors and fine-spun cottons that could be purchased from abroad. Lyosha liked to consider himself a man of the people—provided the people wanted nothing from him.

My father motioned for the hall to rise. I straightened reflexively. As Father began his welcome speech, I kept my hands clasped in front of me; I knew if Lyosha caught any of us fidgeting, he'd have harsh words and harsher actions for later. As subtly as I could, I let my eyes and mind wander over the motifs on the walls. They told the story of the duchies—the duchy Above, and the duchy Below. Our duchy, which sat on a frozen lake, and the land that thrived beneath the ice. More than anything, I wanted to see what truly lay Below. But I would never get the chance. Only Father was allowed to enter that realm.

I focused next on a hunting scene with a former grand duke and a cornered bear. I recalled bones, starting with the bear's nose. Nasal, premaxilla, maxilla. When ground, stabilizer for liquids that tend to curdle. Incisors, canines. Amulets for strength with no demonstrable benefit.

I was nearing the ilium when the patter of applause interrupted me. The speech was over. I joined in, lifting my chin so that I could look properly impressed. Father offered Mother his arm, and she took it with barely a sneer. They stepped down from the dais together. The brideshow had formally begun.

Prime Minister Eirhan came forward and bowed perfunctorily before murmuring something in Father's ear. Father nodded coldly to the Kylmian ministers, who clustered off to the side. It was no secret that Father and Lyosha fought over the ministers; they fought over everything. Lyosha couldn't mount a successful coup without the majority of the ministers on his side, but Mother's support lent him strength; a coup had been rumored for years. My maid Aino had been predicting it once a night for weeks. After all, it was the traditional way for Kylmian children to inherit the dukedom. Poor Aino had taken to double-locking my door each night, and she spent hours fretting right inside it. As though I'd be the first one slaughtered in a coup.

It doesn't matter anyway. The coup wouldn't take place in the next five days, and after that, I'd be down south at the university, where the world was civilized and people didn't kill their relatives as a matter of course.

As the brideshow candidates filed down from the balcony, the first of the guests began to greet my father. King Sigis of Drysiak approached first, and I slunk behind Velosha. Sigis was an observer, not a delegate, but in my opinion, he was more of a royal pain than anything else. He'd oiled his golden beard to catch the lamplight, and aside from a scarlet-and-diamond pin that signified his own colors, he wore our family blue. He'd fostered with us for five years, learning to swagger like Father and manufacture "accidents" leading to broken legs and broken skulls among more than one sibling. Father favored Sigis over any natural-born child of his own, and he had taught him the worst of his tricks. Maybe it was the cruelty they had in common. The Gods knew arrogance was something we all shared.

Sigis embraced Father, and Father clapped him hard on the back. "Welcome, as always."

“As always, I am honored to be welcome,” Sigis said. I didn’t snort at that. I didn’t want to attract attention. But Sigis’s politeness was always an act. He always made me think of a bear—except he lacked the bear’s manners. “I was surprised by the size of the magic display.”

“It’s only the preliminary night,” Father said. “I’ve saved a more impressive show for when the rest of the delegates arrive.”

Sigis’s eyes glinted strangely. “I look forward to it.”

As he moved away, Father leaned over to speak in Mother’s ear. “I could have gotten him to stand up in the brideshow.”

“Sigis doesn’t like boys,” she replied out of the side of her mouth.

Lucky boys, I thought.

Father rolled his shoulders. “I could have done it.”

“Maybe you should have given him a daughter when you had the chance.” Mother sneered. Father shot her a murderous look in response. How those two stayed in the same room long enough to make thirteen children, I’ll never guess.

My dress itched in a number of awkward places, and the noise that bounced off the ice walls threatened to give me a headache. But I had to stay until each of the brideshow guests had been greeted and we’d been dismissed from our formal duties. I curtsied to the first candidate, a blushing, stuttering boy. He muttered a name too soft for me to hear, though I ought to have known it from the crest on his shoulder, a wheel flanked by rearing horses. Father and Mother treated him courteously; Lyosha dismissed him with a curled lip. I didn’t know much about the candidates, but I did know this: My parents and my brother each had a favorite, and it wasn’t the same person.

“Show respect,” said Father as the boy retreated. His voice was soft—dangerous.

Lyosha’s lip curled. “Why? Omsara is a paupers’ kingdom. We don’t need them.”

“The point of the brideshow is to strengthen friendships, not create rifts,” Father said. “I asked you to think about that when you started considering your choices.”

The next candidate came up, a girl who was graceful and tall, brown-skinned and wide-eyed, and dressed in a white-and-green shift dress. It looked loose and free compared with the tight bodices we wore under our coats. She dipped a curtsy to each of us, smiling. I stifled a sigh as I curtsied back and pressed her hand. This was going to take hours. I could be spending the time packing, or studying, or making my university portfolio. Maybe I could persuade Aino to claim I was ill. Anything would be better than pretending I cared about a brother who thought I’d be more convenient dead and about the poor person who was about to marry him.

I spotted Farhod, my alchemy tutor. Like me, he tried to eschew major functions; unlike me, he usually had more success. I rolled my eyes for his benefit. He shook his head reproachfully. His dark, wide eyes were uniquely suited to disapproval.

“I like her,” Lyosha said as the snowdrop girl retreated. “She can be considered.”

“Not so obviously, my love,” Mother warned him. “Everyone needs to start off on equal footing.”

“They’re not equal,” Lyosha replied. “And I don’t see the point in wasting my time.”

“Then perhaps I should select a different heir,” Father replied. “Being grand duke is a balance, not a life of doing whatever suits you, and when.”

Lyosha stiffened, as though he’d been hit by a blast of cold wind. Rage gathered around him like lightning waiting to ground on something. “The future of the duchy is mine. My choice. I don’t have to run it as inefficiently as you have.”

The next candidate faltered. Father motioned them forward with a gracious sweep of his hand, but I couldn’t blame them for moving with reluctance. They introduced themselves in a hurry and retreated as soon as they could.

“Come now.” Mother touched Lyosha’s shoulder, on Father’s side for the first time in years. “There are many considerations to be met. We can’t afford to offend anyone before we know what they’re offering for the marriage.”

Lyosha sulked. “You just don’t like her because she’s not your choice.”

“We talked about this,” Father said.

Lyosha spoke in a voice not quite low enough, not quite practiced enough to reach only our ears. “You talked about this. You didn’t bother to ask.”

“This is a political endeavor—” Father began.

Lyosha’s voice rose. “I have my politics. I make my choices.” A small circle of space began to grow around us. “And if I can’t make my own choice, I’ll make no choice.”

“You are jeopardizing years of statecraft,” Father growled.

“The duchy doesn’t need fat, old men deciding statecraft,” Lyosha hissed. “And neither do I.” His words slid through the air like a red sword. The brideshow candidates stared. The tan, dark-haired girl in the emerald-and-gold riding suit no longer smiled. Lyosha’s anger crackled, so palpable I could almost see it. “This isn’t your brideshow,” he choked out.

“This isn’t your duchy,” Father replied. He sounded almost contemplative. “And the more you try to take it, the more I think it never should be.”

The whole hall was silent for a breath, waiting for Lyosha’s lightning to finally ground.

“The brideshow’s off,” Lyosha called, his voice bouncing off the hard ice walls.

Noise rippled across the hall. Father grabbed for Lyosha’s arm, but Lyosha had spun on his heel and was already striding through the candidates, who scattered and regrouped like a herd of animals.

Father clapped his hands. In response, the guards around the hall slammed their halberds against the ground with a crack. In the silence that followed, he said in an impossibly calm voice, “The brideshow will resume tomorrow. Please enjoy yourselves.”

By the time he was finished, most of the foreign delegates had begun to shout.

“Excellent,” Lyosha murmured beside me, and I shuddered. If Lyosha lost the title of heir-elect, she’d look to win it through a process of elimination—specifically, by eliminating her sibling rivals. Half the court ministers disappeared; the rest decided to settle the matter by arguing at the top of their lungs.

A hand gripped my elbow and yanked me sideways. Aino. She was supposed to stand at the edge of the hall as a lesser lady, but she'd squeezed her way over to me. "Come on," she said, pulling me toward a side door. She elbowed past the minister of the People, and I tripped over the minister of trade's robe. He stumbled past me, steadying himself by putting a hand on top of my head for balance. Had it been a normal night, I would have confronted him for his rudeness.

Aino dragged me past anxious servants to the corridor, barely letting me get my feet under me. The flickering lamps set into the walls caught the red in her auburn hair, and her knuckles were white around my arm. We hurried past officials and servants who rushed the other way, alarmed, no doubt, by the noise. "Slow down," I protested, tripping over the heavy hem of my coat. Aino didn't answer. "Aino," I squeaked as she wrenched me around a corner, nearly dislocating my shoulder. The iron grips on the bottoms of my shoes dug into the ice.

She didn't slow down until we reached the royal wing and passed beyond the guards there. We scurried down corridors carved with the scenes of my family—grand dukes battling with enemies, treating with the duchy Below, choosing brides from their own bridesshows. Winter roses twined above us, their ice petals stretching at a two-thirds bloom.

Aino dug out a key and unlocked my door with trembling fingers. Then she shoved me inside.

The fire was out. The ice walls of my rooms glowed blue-white in moonlight that streamed through thin windowpanes. Aino dumped firewood into the metal basin that served as the fireplace, then started the fire with dry moss and a flint.

The fire basin sat on a thick stone shelf to protect the ice floor beneath, and white and blue tiles lined its chimney. A bearskin rug lay in front of the fire, and I sat in the oak chair there, shifting a blanket to one side. I slid my feet out of my wooden shoes and dug my socks into the rug. A tightness began to uncoil in me. No siblings to murder me, no Father or Mother to examine me, balancing my usefulness and irrelevance against my potential as a threat. I pulled diamond-studded pins from my hair, which has Mother's paleness but not its curl.

My rooms always meant safety to me, but not to Aino. She locked the door, slid the bolt, and heaved a chair from next to the door until it blocked the handle. Then she went to lock the door to the servants' corridor.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Making sure no one separates your head from your neck in whatever happens tonight." Aino's braid had come undone, and she pinned it back up with thin-lipped determination. "This is a coup, and Lyosha and your father are in the middle of it. You don't have to be. How packed are you?"

"Fairly packed." My trunk sat in a corner of the room, stuffed with all the things I thought I'd need at the university—clothes, books, sketches of the biology of Above, a few plates with detail on flora from Below sent up as a sample and gift to Farhod. I was still working on copying his dissection report, a recent—and generous—gift from the duchy Below to expand our academic knowledge.

"Good. We'll set out tonight, and we won't come back until one of them is grand duke and one of them is dead."

No one could boss me around like Aino could. She was more of a mother to me than Mother. She was shorter and slimmer than our family, with wide blue eyes that always looked alarmed and a nose made for poking into my business. She knew the intrigues of Lyosha and my parents before I did, and she made sure I was always well dressed for events of the court, well versed in what to say,

and well protected from the worst of my family's wrath. She tasted my coffee every morning and ran her fingers along the seams of my new clothes to check for razors my siblings might have slipped in. Worrying for my safety lined her mouth and forehead and streaked her hair with gray before its time. In the weeks before, she'd looked more and more worn out as she updated me on which minister backed which family member and how many siblings were trying to get involved in the imminent coup.

I didn't pay much attention to it. I cared less for Lyosha's political ambitions than I did for a vial of wolf urine. At least I could learn something interesting from wolf urine. And as long as my chief interests were the flora and fauna of Above and Below, I doubted any ministers or ambitious family members cared about me. All the same: "I can't leave yet." Even if I had no interest in the duchy, I had a duty. Our family was Kylma Above, and we had responsibilities to uphold. Father had stipulated that I could go south when the brideshow was over, not before. If I violated his order, he might find some way to prevent me from going to the university at all.

I went over to my desk, skipping across the floor in my wool socks. "What are you doing?" Aino asked.

"I might as well get some work done." I pulled my technical drawings from the middle drawer of the desk. I was copying Minister Farhod's, and I had to finish them before I went south. They'd be part of my university portfolio and application. Farhod had warned me that gaining admittance was hard, even for the daughter of a grand duke—but detailed dissection notes of a creature never seen before was sure to catch their attention.

"You ought to rest." Aino checked the door, then paced back to the fire, dispersing the logs with a poker. "We shouldn't have lit this. What if someone realizes you're here?"

I rolled my eyes as I lit the little candle under my frozen inkwell. Aino was back to her favorite hobby: fretting. "No one can see me, and no one's going to care. Fetch my robe, won't you?"

She stomped off, muttering about ungrateful brats and coups and heads. I was restless, too, and opened the window next to my desk, leaning out to let the cold air sting my cheeks.

The palace was quieter than usual. Maybe we really were on the cusp of a coup. Or maybe the brideshow was canceled, and nobody wanted to celebrate. From here, I could just see the bridal tower, and I wondered if the candidates had retreated to it. The girl in the riding suit didn't seem like the type to retreat from anything. A lone figure hurried across a decorative wall, and four stories beneath me lay the thick ice sheet that separated Above and Below.

I wanted to crack that ice so badly that it split my heart to think about it. Beneath that ice swam undulating bodies with serpentine legs, vague shapes I could nearly recognize when I walked on the lake's frozen surface. The duchy Below was our closest ally and our dearest friend. It was the only political matter I had any interest in. It was the greatest thing Father had denied me—and denied me, and denied me.

Aino draped my robe around my shoulders. "Shut the window," she said, reaching past me to do it herself.

I pulled my head inside. "No one's going to shoot me from the palace walls."

"Honestly, Ekata. If there is one night my worrying might save your life, it's tonight." She cinched the robe around my waist. "You've never been the sweet, obedient type. Humor me."

“I’ll keep the doors and windows locked.” I forced myself not to roll my eyes again. “But don’t call for a sled. And let me work for a few hours before bed. There’s nothing unsafe about sitting at my desk.”

“You can work for half an hour, then I’m dousing the fire. And if anyone knocks, say nothing. You’re not here.”

I shook my head and tucked my chin to hide a smile. “All right.”

I didn’t hide it well enough. “Don’t treat this like a joke, my lady,” Aino snapped. She only used my lady when she was really cross. “I’m concerned about your life, and all you can think of is livers and cross sections.” She curled her lip at the sheet on my desk on which Minister Farhod had painstakingly drawn a number of internal organs in a hand so fine they still seemed to glisten.

I licked the nib of my pen. “Aino, relax,” I said. “The kitchen boy’s more politically involved than I am. Whatever occurs tonight, it’s hardly going to concern us.”

As it happened, I was wrong.