

Winter Song



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"You do not seem to understand what I am saying, Father."

Raymond d Aix's voice was quiet, but his pale eyes were like glittering ice in his thin, dark face. "You cannot have me without accepting Alys of Marlowe as my wife."

"Marriages made in haste by silly boys can be annulled," Alphonse d Alx replied sharply.

"I am not married to Alys. Her father is a most upright and honorable man. He would not even permit a betrothal between us until your permission could be obtained," Raymond said.

Alphonse stared at his son. Raymond had always been long and lean, and now he was painfully thin. Despite what should have been a good night's sleep, bruised-looking patches showed beneath his eyes. It was clear that he had traveled far and hard with insufficient rest. He had arrived on the preceding evening with ten guardsmen and a master-at-arms, all of them haggard from hard riding. Little information could be gleaned from any of them beyond the fact that they had come all the way from England in about eighteen days, which Alphonse did not doubt. The good horses they rode were hardly more than scarecrows, and the men were glazed and gray with fatigue.

Raymond had wolfed down the food provided for him, patted his hysterical mother and sisters kindly, and told his father he had important matters to discuss with him but would leave them to the next day, as he was half-dead for need of sleep. Alphonse had made no objections. First, it was obvious that Raymond was exhausted, but more than that kept Alphonse quiet. There was something different about Raymond, something in the assurance of his voice when he said tomorrow, and something in the way he treated his mother and sisters. He was kind---that had not changed----but there was also contempt in the looks he bent on them.

This morning both the assurance and the contempt had shown again, but they were veiled under consideration as

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