

MIDWINTER

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MATTHEW STURGES



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This book is dedicated to

SHERBY HARPER,

*a teacher to whom more than one person has dedicated a first novel,
and with good reason.*

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Part One

Winter comes to the land only once in a hundred years.

When it comes, the always-blossoming cherry trees close their petals and turn away from the chill wind. The animals of the forest come down from their trees and rocks and burrow deep into the ground for warmth. The Channel Sea grows angry and gray. The sun shines less brightly, hiding its face behind clouds rough as granite. When the River Ebe freezes over and a man can walk from Colthorn to Miday over the ice, then Midwinter has officially begun.

Midwinter is the darkest season. It is a time of repentance and of somber reflection during which even the Queen will wear black. In the mountain temples of the Arcadians, the icons are covered with dark cloth and the ancient censers are unwrapped and burned; they swing dangling from the fingers of silent monks who walk the frigid stone floors of their temples barefoot. Around lakeside villages and in certain city shops where gaiety is the order of business, signs are hung reading simply, "Closed for Midwinter."

There is a rumor in the court of the City Emerald that during Midwinter even Regina Titania's powers ebb, that the Queen herself becomes pale and cold to the touch. But this is only a rumor, and a treasonous one at that.

It lasts until the ice cracks and the first new fish is caught in the Ebe. The lucky fisherman who catches it becomes Lord of Colthorn for the day, and so for months before they have any chance of succeeding, the peasantry bring their poles and lines to the water's edge, waiting for Firstcome to return.

Firstcome is the time of rebirth. Every city in the land, from the tiniest

hamlet to the City Emerald herself, has its own centuries-old tradition for celebrating the coming of the new summer and the greens and yellows and blues that accompany it.

But until then, the trees will wear a wreath of white around their heads and the hills will be capped with reflective ice. From the farthest north expanse of the land, the snow will creep southward, stirring hurricanes in the Emerald Bay to lash at the city folk. Even the desert gnomes will feel a chill in their mud homes in the far south, but the snow will melt over the swamplands and its inhabitants will suffer a year or more of icy rain before First-come rescues them.

Until then, it is Midwinter.

the prison of crere sulace and certain of its inhabitants

Dumesne, huge and crazy, took a step toward Raieve and flashed his ugly teeth. He showed her the blade of a thin knife in his belt and smiled at her.

Raieve spared a glance for the Low Guard of Watch and found him nowhere in evidence. She planted her foot and stood firm in the freezing narrow courtyard that separated the towers of Crere Sulace, facing Dumesne. A new fall of snow twisted in the windy courtyard, settling on clothing and hair and dusting the courtyard walls with white. Many of the assembled prisoners, in their ragged furs and cheap boots, clapped their bare hands against the cold and urged Dumesne on. Some of the others, the pretty folk, hung back and watched with feigned disinterest from afar. Mauritanie, the strong quiet one, stared directly at her. She felt his eyes watching her movements, appraising her.

Raieve glared at her attacker. "See these?" she said, pulling three of her braids from the left side of her head and holding them before her. "I earned each one of them facing an armed opponent with my bare hands."

Dumesne ran his gloved fingers over his recently shaved head, the tips of his ears rising just above the top of his skull. "I once had more braids than you could count, foreigner. Don't make me cut your tongue out before I kill you."

Raieve whirled her metal-tipped braids like whipcords and flashed them out. One of them caught Dumesne in the eye and he staggered back, clutching his face. He went for the knife then, but it was already gone. When he managed both eyes open again, she was holding it in his face.

There was courteous applause from the pretty section. From the corner of her eye, she watched some of them pass coins back and forth. They were betting on her. Mauritane, though, did not move.

"You fight like a woman," said Dumesne, sneering.

Raieve planted the knife in his thigh and dragged it out at an angle. Dumesne pinwheeled backward and she advanced on him. "Where I come from," she said, "there is no higher compliment." She swept with her left leg, and Dumesne fell to the ground, clutching his wound. "Must I kill you now," shouted Raieve over the yells of the crowd, "or do I have your oath of respect?"

"I would rather be dead than swear oath to a woman and a foreigner."

"That is your option," she said. She raised the knife.

"Halt!" came a voice from the side. Mauritane rose and approached them. Raieve held the knife still, waiting.

"This is no concern of yours," said Raieve.

Mauritane approached her and took the knife from her hand. He made her feel like a child; it never occurred to her to defend against him.

"I don't need rescuing from you, *Captain*," Dumesne sneered the title.

"Give me your oath," said Mauritane, "and you can suffer your humiliation and live. Otherwise, I'll leave the two of you to your business." He glared at Dumesne.

Dumesne looked back and forth between them. He hung his head. "I swear it. By oak and thorn I swear it. No harm will come to the woman by my hand."

"Wise choice," said Mauritane. He helped Dumesne to his feet. "Go," he said, "or I'll fillet you myself." He handed Dumesne the knife, handle first.

"You made me look small," Raieve said, once Mauritane had led her back to the fire. The crowd was dispersing, and the ragged onlookers gave Mauritane a wide berth.

"No, I saved your life," Mauritane answered. "Dumesne has blood oaths sworn with twenty other inmates. Any of them would be honor bound to kill you if you'd slain him."

"I would face them all," said Raieve, her pride making her face glow red.

"No doubt," said Mauritane, sweeping his braids back from his face as he

leaned over the fire. “But that would be a poor strategy for survival here. You’re new. You need to learn patience.”

“Why did he call you Captain?” asked Raieve after a brief pause. “Are you an officer of the Unseelie Army?”

“No,” said Mauritane.

“What then?”

“The honorific no longer applies to me, so it doesn’t matter. You may call me Mauritane, if you wish.”

He was quiet then. He pulled out a pipe and lit it, squinting at the sky. Raieve looked up as well but saw only gray. Around the cornice of the East Tower, a few crows flitted through the swirling snowflakes.

She looked at Mauritane, and he allowed her the look, studying the contents of his pipe. He was not young, but far from old. The thin creases in his face stood out, ruddy in the freezing air. His braids were long and precise, done in the military style of the Kingdom, unlike Raieve’s, which she’d tied herself without the aid of a mirror, standing over the men she’d killed to earn them. Built compactly, Mauritane was only a finger taller than she, but he carried himself the way a taller man stands, and his shoulders were wide and strong.

“Do I meet with your approval?” Mauritane asked, not looking at her.

She scowled and turned away, breathing a curse only when she knew he could not hear it.



The prison was once the summer home of Prince Crere Sulace, the Faerie lord of Twin Birch Torn, but the Queen appropriated it in the distant past over some forgotten sin, and its lord was incarcerated there. Over the years, Crere Sulace became the Queen’s favorite dumping ground, home to those not fated for the hangman’s noose or the executioner’s ax. It was a gulag for lords who no longer found favor at court, ranking officials in the polity who were caught with their hands in the coffers, and visiting dignitaries from worlds who managed to earn the Queen’s spite. Those prisoners of the lower classes were lumped in with them, it was rumored, simply out of spite.

The setting for Crere Sulace, among the granite cliffs and the weeping heather of the Channel Sea lands, is dreary enough in the fair years, but in Midwinter the snow-clad peaks and ashen parapets sing of gloom and frustration. In Midwinter the prisoners can see their own breath; they must wear scavenged heavy furs out in the courtyard; they linger by the braziers at the guardhouse gates, swapping stories with the grizzled deputy wardens and guards.

The South Tower was once the primary residence of the Prince Crere Sulace in the time of the Unseelie Wars. Old prisoners believed that the Prince could still be found there, wandering the spellturned halls of the tower, singing spirit songs of death and decay. The towers had been turned dozens, if not hundreds, of times in years past, and now it was no easy thing to say which room was next to which other or what distance separated any two places in the tower. In recent years, the ghostly apparitions and vertiginous twisting hallways finally caused enough harm that the Chief Warden was forced to take notice. He shut down the tower for all but bulk storage and the maintenance of the sea lamp in the cupola.

In the highest floor of the tower, Jem Alan, the Vice Warden, checked the lamp oil for the sea lamp and tilted the reflector out a bit in case some fishermen from Hawthorne were north this evening, hunting the dark northern lanes for sturgeon and salmon. The hour was approaching sunset, or what passed for it in this icy hell of a season, and he didn't want to get caught in the South Tower after dark. Buttoning his fur cloak, he edged his way carefully down the slick steps along the tower's inner wall. Tired green witchlight cast multiple shadows over the steps, and as there was no rail, Jem Alan hugged the wall, holding his torch before him like a ward. He tried to ignore the heaving, moaning sounds that came from the barred doors at each landing.

He closed the tower's inner door and sealed it with its rune before opening the outer door. Across the main yard he saw a cluster of inmates singing shanties with Gray Mave, the Low Chief of Watch. Mave was a local, one of the Hawthorne natives who eschewed fishing in the cold Channel Sea waters for lighter duty at Crere Sulace.

"Enough, Low Chief," called Jem Alan from across the yard. He marched to the guardhouse and leaned on the cord for the Evening Watch bell. The

snow that had begun earlier in the day was erratic now, coming in fits and starts, visible only in the slowly growing halo around the fire. "Get up and relieve Drinkwater; the Evening Watch is upon us."

Mave reached slowly into his pockets for a pair of gloves, his heavy frame causing his own cloak to billow around him comically.

"And have someone brought in to recharge the witchlight on the tower steps," added Jem Alan. "I nearly killed myself coming down just now." Jem Alan removed his own gloves, tired brown things with holes cut for the fingers, and held them over the fire.

"Riders will come tonight," said Mave suddenly, his eyes pondering the firelight around the grill. "It will be the beginning of bad things."

"Don't be superstitious," said Jem Alan. "Are you a witch woman, that you can see things in fire?"

Gray Mave shrugged. "I only know it, is all."

Jem Alan rolled his eyes. "Get to your post."



Night had nearly fallen on the mountains when the riders appeared in the Longmont Pass. Even from a distance it was clear that this was a royal emissary, sporting the blue and gold griffon standard of the Seelie Court. Gray Mave, keeping the Evening Watch, sent up the spot flare and rang the visitors' bell in the guard tower.

Chief Warden Crenyllice summoned Jem Alan to his office, which comprised the entire second floor of the North Tower.

"Vice Warden, did I just hear the visitors' bell?"

"Aye, sir." Jem Alan struggled to fasten the straps of his dress tunic around his barrel chest.

"This is unexpected."

"Aye, sir. The supply train isn't due for a fortnight. This party flies royal colors, sir." Jem Alan chose to omit his hearing of Mave's prediction earlier in the evening.

The Chief Warden ran his fingers through his hair, drawing his single braid forward so that it brushed against the medals on his chest.

“If they’re here out of turn then it’ll be a special prisoner or a pardon. Have the guards come to line in the yard, and be quick about it. And by the Queen’s tits, have the men in uniform.”

Five riders in formation approached the crest of the pass, which was a knife’s edge crevice that received snow year-round during Midwinter. Framed neatly between the nearly vertical rock faces that composed the pass, the Prison Crere Sulace rose from its plateau of rough basalt and granite like an embedded snowflake, its spellturned towers and crumbling spires forming a ghostlike symmetry against the darker rock face from which it projected.

The lead rider was the color point, carrying two standards cross-armed. One was the blue and gold griffon of the Queen. The other, smaller flag was the purple sign of the Royal Guard, the Queen’s personal army. Flanking the center rider was a pair of Standard Guards, bearing the insignia of their companies on their capes, their lances slung at their backs. The post rider was the junior officer, a lieutenant by rank.

In the center of the formation, riding an armored mount, was the party’s leader, wearing the cape of a commander in the Royal Guard. He rode in the chill wind with the hood of his cloak pushed back, his nine victory braids whipping behind him in the wind. He stood his mount with perfect poise, even over the slick terrain of the rocky pass, his eyes fixed on Crere Sulace.

The commander, whose name was Purane-Es, motioned the party to stop just past the summit of the pass. The road dipped gently here down to the flat plateau abreast of the ocean. At the far end of the plateau, the road led up a steep incline to the gates of Crere Sulace and ended there.

From Purane-Es’s vantage point, it was clear that Crere Sulace was no longer the summer estate of a grand lord of Faerie, nor had been for many, many years. The walls showed signs of age and disrepair. The balconies along the rooftop of the structure’s South Tower had been replaced with rough crenellations and archery nests. Around the main wall, a coil of iron wire angled down toward the palace; a measure meant to keep people in rather than out.

Originating in the South Tower, a spot flare sparked in the sky, reaching an altitude that brought it over the ocean. It crackled three times in a welcome of tenacious recognition. It was now Purane-Es’s turn. He nodded to his

lieutenant, who retrieved a signaling flare from his saddlebags and sent it into the air. Three more cracks signaled the party's friendly intentions. Purane-Es dug in his spurs and urged the party forward.

A trio of mounted guards, including Jem Alan, rode out from the gates to meet them. They quickly exchanged formal courtesies (a process much accelerated due to the cold) and rode through the gates together.

Chief Warden Crenyllice stood at attention in the loggia that lined the main yard's south wall. When Purane-Es dismounted, Crenyllice bowed deeply to him and quickly waved to the grooms to fetch the party's horses.

"Welcome to Crere Sulace, Commander," said Crenyllice, bowing again. "It is indeed an honor for us to receive a guest of your rank. May your children meet you in Arcadia."

Purane-Es nodded. "Take me to your office," he said. "I'm here on important business." His silver braids fell around his face.

Crenyllice frowned at the lack of etiquette but had no room to show his displeasure. The commander outranked him by orders of magnitude, and his impropriety would have to pass without comment.

Once in Crenyllice's office, Purane-Es removed his gloves and brushed snow from his shoulders and hair. He seated himself without being asked.

"May I offer you a drink?" said Crenyllice hopefully.

Purane-Es's face softened. "Aye, a brandy will do."

Crenyllice squirmed against the vague insult of "will do," but said nothing as he fixed the drink himself, waving the guards back, and handed it to the commander.

"We are a remote outpost of the Queen's Army, sire, doing our best with what we receive," said Crenyllice. "I'm afraid this brandy is the best I can offer, you see."

"Please spare me your homespun attempts at courtesy," said Purane-Es, bored. "It embarrasses both of us. In my presence you will simply do as I say and leave the formalities for your betters."

Crenyllice's face reddened, but he said nothing.

"I come with a letter from the Chamberlain Marcuse," said Purane-Es, finishing his drink. "The letter instructs you to release several inmates on my recognizance, to perform an errand for Her Majesty."

Crenyllice sputtered. "But sire. Surely the guard . . ."

Purane-Es waved his hand. "Even in this darkened corner of the world, I presume things do not always follow the straight path. It is not yours to question. You will do as you are instructed."

"Which prisoners?" Crenyllice managed.

"There is only one I have in mind: Mauritane. Do you know of him?"

"Aye, sir. He's been mine for two years now."

"Now he's mine. I want him brought to me, and I will allow him to choose the remainder of his party."

"What is the task for which he is summoned, sire?"

Purane-Es laughed. "I'm sure that's none of your concern. Only see that Mauritane is brought to me quickly."



Gray Mave knocked quietly on the door to Mauritane's cell. Once a grand bedroom, the space had been spellturned so many times that it seemed an echo of itself. Not even Gray Mave, who'd been a guard at Crere Sulace for twenty years, knew how many of it existed in the tower.

"Come," said Mauritane. He lay on his bunk, fully dressed, as though he were expecting to be disturbed. Around him, the gilt-edged walls angled blankly to the ceiling, the original wall coverings and paintings having been removed ages ago, light shapes on the tattered wallpaper their only legacy.

Gray Mave fitted his key into the lock and opened the door outward. "You're to come to the warden's office right away." Mave's fat face heaved as he strained to catch his breath.

"What is it?" Mauritane sat up warily.

"A lord from the City Emerald, sir. Rode in flying royal colors. Wanted to see you personally."

Mauritane rose and pulled on his fur cloak. "You don't have to call me 'sir,' you know," he said.

Gray Mave bowed his head. "I know, sir. But considering your history, it doesn't seem right to call you by name."

"Much lower men than you have called me worse," Mauritane said. "I

don't see that it matters much these days, anyhow." He joined Gray Mave in the hall, accepting the manacles Mave placed on him without question.

"I should tell you," said Mave, as they walked the darkened hallway. "Since you've given me no trouble during your stay here and all."

"What?"

"I've had a premonition. Bad omen. The riders that have come."

"I see," said Mauritane. "Is Premonition a Gift of yours?"

"Aye," said Mave. "But you're having me on, aren't you? You don't believe that one such as me could have the Gifts. Jem Alan doesn't."

"I'm built from coarser clay than you, Gray Mave," said Mauritane. "And I've got more Gifts than do me any good. I wouldn't put too much stock into what Jem Alan says."

Gray Mave smiled, then frowned. "This sign was very dark. I fear for you to be caught in it."

"If I am," said Mauritane, "then at least I've been forewarned."



Gray Mave led Mauritane, shackled, into Crenyllice's office. The glow from the fire and the lamps in the warden's elaborate wall sconces were bright after the dim hallway, and Mauritane squinted against them briefly.

"Hello, Mauritane," said a familiar voice. "I see that imprisonment agrees with you."

When Mauritane looked up, it was into the eyes of Purane-Es, seated at the warden's desk across the room. For a moment, Mauritane stood completely still. No emotion showed on his face.

With a single fluid movement, Mauritane twisted around Gray Mave and ducked behind him, pulling the larger man down to his knees. Dislodging his arms, he planted his leg on Mave's back and then drew the guard's sword with both hands. "Your premonition was correct," he whispered in Mave's ear.

He turned the sword in his hands as he leaped, directing the blade's gleaming point at the throat of Purane-Es.