

CHAPTER 1



Selena was sketching the family estate she'd never see again when furtive movement out her bedroom window caught her eye. Her pencil halting, she scrutinized the black-clad man as he skulked down the street and rapped on the door of her uncle's townhouse. Who was he? She'd never met him—not surprising since she'd not met anyone in the six months she'd lived in Ormas, yet his tenebrous air alarmed her.

The back of her neck prickled as Uncle Adan ushered his visitor inside. Why had he invited a man like *that* as their first visitor? Another one of his shady schemes? She must find out so she could outwit whatever he was plotting.

Selena grimaced as she uncurled from the window seat. Father used to scold Uncle Adan for his schemes, which had only inspired her uncle to escalate them. Like when he'd bound brownies to the kitchen after Father had said the estate couldn't afford to hire the pair her uncle had found. That attempt to best Father and impress Mother had wrecked the kitchen when the household spirits escaped her uncle's spell the following day.

But her parents could no longer curb her uncle. Last year a dying peddler had brought wraith flu along with his ribbons, and the virulent strain had felled her parents and half the

village. Selena had nearly died as well, yet her uncle had only been ill a week. The day after her parents' funeral, Uncle Adan had sold the country estate that had belonged to Midors for generations to fund his move to Ormas. For some reason, he'd brought her along—perhaps to prevent gossip, but more likely because he'd hoped the lengthy journey across Calatini would kill her.

As she crept downstairs, the air was dead yet heavy with silence. Where were her uncle's few servants? Were they hiding from his suspicious visitor? She shivered as she locked the gamesroom door before removing the faded painting over the peepholes she'd drilled into Uncle Adan's study to keep abreast of his schemes.

"...so I must recoup the funds I squandered on her recovery and upkeep. By the Goddess, she eats more than all my servants combined." Seated at his desk across the study, her uncle scowled and snipped a branch on the miniature cedar tree he was sculpting.

Selena suppressed a snort. 'Twas because the miser didn't feed his servants enough to keep will-o'-the-wisps alive. And the magical ghost lights who misled night travelers had no corporeal form.

Uncle Adan's tone turned sly, "And I heard you're skilled at generating gold from the most burdensome dross, witch."

Sprawled in the chair before the desk, the lanky witch smirked. "I'm no Rhiannon descendant, but I'm clever at what I do. Be warned, my methods aren't for weaklings or those who care about that dross's fate."

Her uncle echoed the witch's smirk as he snipped another branch. "Good. She's all that remains of my brother, so the worse her fate, the better. I almost wish he were alive to see his precious daughter's destruction."

Selena's stomach tensed. Uncle Adan had always resented Father, but he'd never plotted her destruction before. Perhaps

because now Mother was no longer alive to temper him. Selena swallowed to soothe her aching throat.

The witch smoothed his scraggly beard and eyed Uncle Adan. "How old is your niece?"

Her uncle grimaced as he moved the cedar tree to the corner of his desk. "Twenty-four last month."

The witch steepled his bony fingers. "Why is she still unwed?"

Uncle Adan snorted and leaned back in his seat. "Because Arias was too soft on her. The fool. If she'd been my daughter, I'd have forced her to wed before she reached her majority four years ago."

Selena clenched her hands. Father had been no *fool*—he and Mother had loved her and wanted her to find a lifelong love like they had. And they'd understood waiting to meet the perfect spouse. Father had been forty when he'd met Mother, the girl his much younger brother wanted to court. Within a fortnight of meeting, Father and Mother had eloped and married in a blood-binding, the most unbreakable ceremony possible.

The witch's hum brought her back to him and her uncle. "So she's still pure then?"

Uncle Adan sneered, his expression perverting his resemblance to her loving father. "No doubt. Just like Arias, my niece is so sanctimonious it nauseates me."

Selena stiffened and glared at her uncle. Sanctimonious? She was no such thing! Particular, perhaps...

The witch's dark eyes gleamed with depraved zeal. "A virgin of her age shall fetch a bundle in the right market. Especially if she's halfway pretty."

A chill skittering across her skin, Selena shuddered at the witch's smile. Whatever he meant by right market couldn't be pleasant.

Still sneering, her uncle shrugged. "She is. Particularly if you like wholesome."

The gleam in the witch's eyes burned brighter. "Even better."

Uncle Adan leaned forward, his sneer fading to a frown. "What did you mean by right market? Only a desperate man would wed a spinster with no dowry."

The witch chuckled. "True, but certain gentlemen would pay plenty for a pure, wholesome lady they can despoil without being forced to wed. Revenge against the ladies in their life they can't punish."

Selena's breath froze as her pulse surged. Oh, Goddess. She'd been correct. The right market wasn't pleasant at all. In fact, 'twas horrifying.

The witch rubbed his chin. "I'll send out word to interested parties, and we can set an auction for late next month. The season shall be well underway by then, so we'll have numerous bidders."

Uncle Adan arched a brow. "And your payment for arranging all this?"

The witch's responding grin glinted with malevolence. "A portion of her auction price, and the energy produced by her rape. A pure lady of your niece's age is rarer than a faebird's teeth and shall produce especially potent energy. A witch like myself must simply be nearby to gather it."

Ice clawing at her throat, Selena shuddered again. From his words, her uncle's visitor must be a black witch. Black witches were infamous for poisons, curses, and other evil spells. Forbidden by the Goddess, Rhiannon the founder of human magic, and kingdoms across Damensea, black witches lived in hiding. Yet her uncle had unearthed one.

Uncle Adan leaned back in his seat with a smirk. "If my niece shall generate such bounty, then I deserve more than mere money for her virginity. Perhaps you could use some of her potent energy to craft a spell for me to gain influence at court..."

Since her uncle's toadying was insignificant, Selena stepped back from her peepholes and rehung the painting. She unlocked the gamesroom door then scurried upstairs on silent feet. The

black witch and her uncle mustn't discover her spying. Goddess knew how they'd retaliate.

She locked her bedroom's feeble door behind her. Her heart thudding in her ears, she snatched her sketch journal from the window seat then curled up on the lumpy chair beside her bed. Sketching always helped her think. And she must think hard to outwit Uncle Adan's latest scheme.

Her hand trembled as she began sketching. Goddess, how could she foil that auction? She wasn't a witch, and she'd little experience with magic. Her small village had only had two minor witches—sisters who spent most of their meager power divining for copper and purifying air inside the mine. And even if she were still home, both had been killed by the wraith flu last year.

She only knew the basics about magic any child learned. Rhiannon had wheedled the secret of magic from the Goddess over two millennia ago. And spells required payment in kind to fuel them, but that cost could be difficult to predict.

Selena grimaced. Unfortunately, she knew little else. She'd never used more than common spells, most of them purchased from the sisters. So she knew no spell to prevent the black witch from stealing the power produced by her rape.

Her pencil halted mid-sketch. But what if she disposed of her virginity without being raped? 'Twould surely lessen the power the black witch could gather, so he wouldn't bother to arrange the auction, and she'd escape being raped.

She sighed and licked her parched lips. She'd always hungered for lasting love to strike like her parents' had, and coupling should be an expression of that love. Could she truly surrender that?

After a moment, she jerked a nod. Somehow, she must. 'Twas the only way to escape her uncle's scheme. So she'd bed someone without love. But how?

Her fingers clenching her pencil, Selena began sketching again. Uncle Adan's servants would never touch her—not that

she wanted their attentions. She knew no one in Ormas, and her uncle would never introduce her at court while plotting her destruction. And 'twould be perilous to approach a stranger on the street.

No, she must meet her deflowerer somewhere accustomed to handling such dealings—a brothel. Fortunately, her uncle couldn't afford a townhouse in one of the better neighborhoods near the palace, so multiple brothels should be nearby. And last week she'd overheard the cook and the footman discussing one on Mermaid Street. She'd start there.

Selena cocked her head as she finished her sketch. Once she was no longer pure, she must ensure Uncle Adan learned about her ruined state. Then he'd have nothing to sell to the black witch. Without the power and money her virginity would engender, she could leave without them pursuing her. Perhaps she could become a governess or find a school needing an art instructor. As long as her employer never learned of her visit to a brothel, either would be better than living with her uncle.

CHAPTER 2



After his first council meeting, Aragon gritted a serene smile as the eleven other councilors strolled from the room. The newest councilor couldn't let the others see his strain. Councilors must always exude aplomb. They served as advisors to the king, and in addition to representing their duchy, they each headed a government ministry. And as the only new councilor, he'd yet to prove his worth.

Once they were alone, Aragon dropped his smile and turned to Devon beside him. "Are council meetings always like that?"

His best friend leaned back in his seat at the head of the table. "More or less. Overwhelmed, were you?"

"Yes..." Aragon rubbed his brow. His head ached like he'd been thrust into a magical creature's kingdom without a guide. Since the catastrophic Stone Wars before the founding of Calatini, most magical creatures lived north of the Walle, so humans only knew many by reputation. And suddenly living among magical creatures would be nothing like simply knowing of them. Just like serving on the council was nothing like discussing council meetings with Father.

Aragon grimaced at Devon. "I knew nothing about half the

matters the other councilors mentioned. I reviewed Father's notes, but they weren't enough."

Devon cocked his crownless head. "I experienced that at my first council meeting too. Don't fret; you'll catch up soon."

Aragon sighed. Hopefully so. He couldn't fail at the first duty he'd assumed from Father. He'd placed his trust in Aragon when he'd retired after his last term. "I hope I can fulfill my duties as Calatini's Minister of Agriculture as well as he did."

Devon clapped Aragon's shoulder. "You shall. Allow yourself time. I felt the same when I became king two years ago. But now I'm accustomed to ruling."

Aragon suppressed a wince. He shouldn't be complaining. At least his father was alive, so he could seek advice whenever he wanted. Devon couldn't. Since King Sarastor had unexpectedly died from angina, Devon had no family except for Aragon and his family, who were mere third cousins.

He smiled and straightened in his seat. He should invite Devon to dinner. His friend hadn't joined them in months, and he might distract Mother's guests. "What are your plans for this evening?"

Devon shrugged. "Wading through the stack of reports on the Wildewall dispute I received this morning. If not dealt with soon, it could damage trade with our magical neighbors north of the Walle."

Aragon slouched, his head throbbing again. Due to their longstanding treaty with the nightmara, Calatini was one of the few human kingdoms other magical creatures traded with, so ensuring that continued took precedence over his little problem. He sighed. "You aren't free for dinner then. Pity. I'm not anticipating facing it alone."

Devon arched his brows. "Why?"

Aragon grimaced. Because Mother had become more managing than a mama trollless during autumn. He loved her, and she always meant well, but when determined, she'd harp on

something for ages. Sometimes not even Father could get her to relent. And right now, she was determined to see Aragon wed. "Mother expressly ordered me to attend dinner tonight and not be late."

Devon winced and slanted him a sympathetic glance. "Another potential bride?"

Aragon sighed and almost shuddered. "More than one, I suspect." And only interested in his title and fortune like her previous candidates. "She's become desperate in recent months. Apparently, no lady shall have me if I wait much longer."

"I doubt that." Devon shook his head. "Perhaps you should act like Hawke when your mother meddles and avoid dinner. Visit that tavern you like near the docks."

Aragon's head eased at Devon's suggestion. Perhaps he could—for one night at least. As heir, he must settle for one of Mother's candidates eventually, but he could escape tonight. "The Gold Griffin does serve a fine fish pie."

Devon chuckled and rose. "'Tis decided then. Play some cards for me. I must return to those reports."

Aragon and his cousin strode from the council room. Two royal guards joining him, Devon turned toward his study, while Aragon headed for his carriage at the stables.

Once Aragon returned to the family townhouse, he snuck around back and slipped inside. Please let Mother not spot him. She'd guilt him into remaining for dinner if she did. He dashed upstairs and changed into riding clothes then left the way he'd entered.

He relaxed when he rode from the stables without anyone stopping him. He inhaled the brisk spring air with a smile. Devon's suggestion was the perfect remedy to forget the grasping potential brides and stressful council meeting.

After riding through the crowded streets of Ormas, he left his bay mare at the stables at the end of Mermaid Street and strode to The Gold Griffin, grinning at the peeling sign swinging above

the door. He loved the rowdy tavern and had since he first stumbled across it four years ago.

He'd been riding home from the nearby orphanage his youngest brother Hawke supported. The gold griffin sign had caught his eye because griffins were land creatures renowned for inspiring truth and taking lifelong mates—an unusual choice for a tavern near the docks. So he'd gone inside, and from the first, everyone at the tavern treated him like an ordinary man rather than the heir to a wealthy duke and cousin to the king. Unlike everyone at court and Mother's candidates. Plus, the tavern's special gold ale glowed when telling the truth, so the card games were always honest. He visited as often as his duties allowed.

Once he entered The Gold Griffin, Aragon nodded at the porter then sat at the bar. Although not packed yet, the tavern was still busy. Sailors bawled chanteys and spilled their glowing tankards of gold ale as they swayed. On the opposite wall, several groups played cards, eyeing their glowing ale after every move. Scattered about the other tables throughout the tavern, tradesmen ate an early dinner in clusters of one or two.

The huge tavern keeper wiped his hands on his tattered apron and barreled over with a broad grin. "Afternoon, Lord Treyvan. What'll you have today?"

Warmed by Micah's hearty welcome, Aragon grinned in return. "Afternoon, Micah. A fish pie and a tankard."

Micah nodded. "Right away."

When the tavern keeper returned with his steaming fish pie and glowing tankard, Aragon's mouth watered. Definitely much better than suffering through dinner with Mother's candidates. "Looks delicious, as always."

Aragon and Micah discussed the tavern while Aragon devoured his meal. Once he finished, he ordered another tankard then joined a group playing cards. Like his companions, he eyed everyone's tankards to discern deceitful plays. While he played cards over the next few hours, more patrons arrived until the tavern was raucous and oven-like.

'Twas well past dinner when Aragon tossed down his final hand and allowed the blacksmith who'd been watching for the past hour take his seat. Mother's candidates surely must have departed, although Mother would scold him for missing dinner when she saw him. Yet a relaxing evening had been worth it.

He shoved through the packed tavern but halted before the door. Rain splattered outside, and dark puddles littered the ground. He glanced at the porter. "How long has it been raining?"

The porter shrugged. "Since shortly after you arrived. Doubt it'll stop any time soon."

Aragon grimaced and blew a sigh. "Of course not." He eyed the tavern. 'Twas much too crowded to stay. He'd brave the rain. If only he'd brought a cloak spelled for it. He stepped outside and sprinted down the street toward the stables.

Halfway there, the cold and steady rain burgeoned into a numbing deluge so heavy he could barely see. Wetter than a drowned firecat, he darted into a nearby doorway to wait for the rain to ease. He should have remained at The Gold Griffin despite the throng.

When he bumped the door behind him, it swung open, and he stumbled inside. He brushed back sodden hair from his eyes and studied his sanctuary from the deluge. Although shabby, the brown entrance hall was florid with golden sconces and dark-red carpet.

A hulking man covered with scars held open the battered door. He appeared more like a brawler than a porter as he inspected Aragon without expression.

Aragon offered a weak smile. He'd not offend such a behemoth. "Evening. Wet one tonight. Could I shelter here until the worst of the storm has passed?"

The hulking porter grunted. "Not up to me. Mistress!"

A blonde woman in a scarlet gown with a precariously low bodice sailed into the entrance hall. She eyed Aragon up and down. "And who might you be, sir?"

Aragon blinked at the woman. Considering the furnishings and her attire, this must be a brothel of some sort. He'd prefer to shelter elsewhere, but he was here. To offset his bedraggled appearance, he swept a courtly bow. "Lord Treyvan, mistress."

The woman, who must be the brothel's madam, eyed him up and down again. "The Duke of Childes's eldest son?"

Aragon jerked a nod. The gleam in her blue eyes echoed that of Mother's more grasping candidates. Wonderful.

The madam smirked. "You're perfect. That'll be twenty gold."

Perfect for what? And twenty gold was a year's wages near the docks—much too steep for shelter from the rain. Aragon glanced at the hulking porter, who chuckled and held out his hand. Aragon sighed. Despite the outrageous price, at least he could dry off. He handed money to the porter.

"Follow me." With an imperious wave, the madam led Aragon upstairs then down a long hall. Muffled moans, shouts, and thumps came from the many closed doors.

Aragon fought a blush. Although not celibate like his middle brother Mel who'd become a priest last year, he was no rakehell like Hawke, who found a new lover every few nights. Honestly, he couldn't fathom that—lovemaking should be more than mere recreation. So he'd never visited a brothel, kept a mistress, or even taken many lovers.

As they reached the final door, he cleared his throat to explain he only wanted a room. "Er..."

The madam purred a chuckle and opened the door. "Go on then, my lord. Enjoy your night." She prodded him inside and shut the door behind him.

Aragon swallowed and glanced about the tawdry room. He wasn't interested in seducing its owner and would rather enjoy his night alone. But how could he refuse without insulting the girl? Perhaps more gold would help.

But then his gaze halted on the adorable lady with sandy-brown hair and freckles hovering beside the crimson bed. From her shabby yet decorous dress, she must be poor gentry and

desperate. As he met her dark-gray eyes, his breath stilled, and his heart pounded in his ears. Goddess, he'd never met anyone so spellbinding.

After a moment, the lady lifted her chin then strode over and smashed her lips against his.