

CHAPTER 1



A serene smile fixed on her lips, Annalise suppressed a sigh as she sipped her sparkling wine and eyed the auras of the fashionable guests at the Duchess of Wildewall's summer ball. To the soul healers and seers who could read them, auras glowed brighter than jewels and reflected people's souls, emotions, health, and magic. Not that the motes revealing magic were common among humans. Unlike magical creatures, humans couldn't generate magical energy, so less than a quarter of humans were witches who could sense and wield magic, and only witches possessed motes inside their auras. Other humans just showed magic outside their auras when using enchanted items or already created spells.

Because of everything reflected in people's auras, watching people and reading their auras was illuminating and the most interesting part of any court event for her. Yet after six years at court, the rainbow of auras in the teeming ballroom was unremarkable. She almost sighed. If only she could return to her family's townhouse and cuddle with her angelcat Finn while listening to her two mated faebirds, Rain and Aria, sing sweet love songs to each other. But unless she was ill, Mother and Father would never let her leave a ball hosted by the head of

their duchy before the dancing had started. And as a powerful soul healer, she rarely suffered illness.

Maintaining her faint smile, Annalise swallowed another sip of sparkling wine. Lady Snow—what court called her for her cool serenity as well as her pale coloring and ice-perfect beauty—mustn't appear bored or forlorn after being abandoned by her escort King Devon for state affairs once again. Not that she was forlorn. She enjoyed the king's escort because he was a kind gentleman and prevented Mother and Father from shoving her at every unwed duke or duke's heir, regardless of their age or disposition. But she didn't love the king. Thank the Goddess. With her secret powers and her family's centuries-long feud with the Ravenstones, she could never become queen.

She nearly grimaced as she twirled her flute of sparkling wine against her lips. Because their ambitions and obsession with the ridiculous Greysnowe-Ravenstone feud often blinded them, Mother and Father couldn't see how impossible it was for her to become queen, a feat no Greysnowe or Ravenstone had ever managed. Hoping for that, they'd even named her after Calatini's first queen. And when she'd blossomed into an otherworldly beauty, they'd been ecstatic and even more certain she was meant to be queen. 'Twas fortunate they'd never discovered her powers as a soul healer.

A faint chill prickling her neck, she clung to her serene smile. Soul healers were coveted because they were extremely rare, female witches who could heal nearly anything, although they formed an irrevocable soulbond the first time they healed an intelligent creature's fatal wound or ailment. As descendants of Esme the Great, Greysnowes bore soul healer daughters every few generations, but they often forced those daughters into forming soulbonds with advantageous gentlemen. 'Twas why, when she'd proudly revealed her first soul-healing to her former nursemaid Alice, Alice had warned her *never* to reveal her powers to anyone, even Mother and Father.

Annalise made herself sip her sparkling wine. Alice was

doubtless right—although Mother and Father loved both of their children, if they knew of her powers, they'd likely be tempted to force her into forming a soulbond with King Devon. That way, she'd have to become queen, and they'd finally best the "treacherous" Ravenstones. They couldn't see that her becoming queen would only inflame the feud. She almost tsked. After three centuries of strife, the two feuding families should just forgive the past and learn to live in harmony.

She sighed and drained her sparkling wine. Not that Mother and Father ever would.

His aura an irrepressible orange with ivory motes like always, Alex smirked as he strode over and handed her a fresh flute of sparkling wine. At eighteen, her younger brother had been living in Ormas for less than three months, so he still found court events diverting. "Why the sigh? The perfect Lady Snow is the most beautiful lady here tonight. According to Mother, your life should be complete at such a triumph."

Annalise allowed herself a tiny shrug. Revealing more emotion in public would attract notice, which might cause someone to realize she was a soul healer and seek to exploit her. But because 'twas Alex, she let her voice sharpen, "I'm the most beautiful lady wherever I go." Since soul healers altered their souls to heal, their transparent auras with electrum motes possessed extra energy, and that made her physical beauty irresistible. Not that her brother knew about her powers. She couldn't burden him with her secrets, and if he knew, Mother and Father might somehow discover her powers too. She quirked a wry smile. "Besides, Mother would only say my life was complete if King Devon proposed."

Alex scowled, his blue eyes darkening. "Unlikely, considering he's abandoned you yet again. He should treat you with more respect."

She hummed and glanced toward King Devon and Lord Farson debating near the refreshments table. The councilor represented the Golddell duchy where the magical, horse-like

nightmara lived, so his urgent matter probably involved the king remaining unwed with the nightmara delegation arriving in two months to renew the Nightmara-Calatini Treaty. Since they were matriarchal, the nightmara would only negotiate with queens, and Calatini's legendary treaty with the nightmara was essential because it earned the trust of other magical creatures, who mostly lived north of the Walle since the catastrophic Stone Wars between humans and magical creatures.

She shook her head. "He treats me as respectfully as he would a sister, but state affairs often intrude. And even though I don't wish to marry him, I'm grateful for his escort."

Alex winced as he eyed Mother and Father, who were beaming as they spoke with the suave Duke of Oakmoor, another of the king's councilors. Although their parents' age and an infamous rakehell, the duke was still unwed, influential, and wealthy, so Mother and Father often pandered to him or those like him. "I suppose the king's escort *does* curb Father and Mother. But I wish you could find a gentleman you truly want courting you."

Her chest squeezing, Annalise managed a smile and sipped her sparkling wine. After all her seasons at court, finding that was unlikely. Court was all about appearances, so most gentlemen never noticed more than her beauty and wealthy parents. And the few who saw her as a person were already in love with another, otherwise uninterested, or an impossible choice. "Perhaps one day."

Alex tsked. "Soon, hopefully. You'll be twenty-four on Summerday next month." He wagged his brows. "Practically a crone. Goddess knows if you can even still bear children."

She almost snorted. *That* was no concern. Soul healers were incredibly fertile and bore children at least a decade longer than other ladies. No, her true concern was finding a trustworthy gentleman who could love the person she was inside and wouldn't exploit her powers. "I'm certain I could—if I ever find a gentleman worthy of being their father."

Annalise was about to continue, but then her skin tingled when powerful nature magic swept across the ballroom. *He* had arrived. Her heart fluttering like always at his presence, she swallowed and licked her lips then forced herself to turn casually toward the back where Lord Ravenstone was greeting the Duchess of Wildewall with a genial smile. Goddess, why must she always react to him?

She suppressed a shiver as her tingling burgeoned. Although the Greysnowe's ancestral enemy, Lord Ravenstone had fascinated her since they'd met in that quiet park during their first season. His lush green aura covered with bronze motes revealed his harmonious and accepting nature as well as his potent powers as a nature witch. He and the royal witch were the only ones at court whose powers rivaled hers as a soul healer. Like her, they must be Rhiannon descendants, the strongest of all witches. Yet unlike her, neither could read auras without a difficult spell, so they fortunately couldn't recognize her powers like she did theirs. Although if he did, Lord Ravenstone was too considerate to exploit her—as a nature witch, he respected all living things and always sought to build connections, and he was steady and strong like a mighty oak.

Then Lord Ravenstone finished greeting their hostess, and his amber eyes met hers across the ballroom.

Although she should look away to feign disinterest, Annalise couldn't resist returning his intense stare. His powers and kind-hearted nature weren't all that separated him from the other gentlemen at court. More active than most, he wore simple attire with his shoulder-length, black hair in a neat queue, and a short beard covered his rugged face. His movements always bursted with energy, and he was renowned as a skilled swordsman, a fearless rider, and a keen hunter. And he beamed whenever outdoors—sometimes resembling a sunbathing tygris, a massive feline who ruled the torrid grasslands far south of Calatini.

Her breath quickened. Plus, like Alex and King Devon, Lord Ravenstone saw more than her beauty. When they'd first met,

he'd talked to her like a person and never ogled. Even after learning they were ancestral enemies, he'd remained respectful. Yet because of the feud, they only saw each other a few times a season, across crowded court events. However, he always noticed details about her no one else did, like Finn's fur on her bodice. And although they never spoke, her chest ached when he quit his hunt for a wife midway through the season every year and returned home to Wildewall.

Then Alex poked her arm with a frown. "Why are you staring at *Lord Ravenstone* like that? And why is the cad returning your stare?"

Her heart lurching, Annalise jerked back and almost spilled sparkling wine on her soft-white ballgown. The first time seeing Lord Ravenstone each season was always the hardest. Thankfully, Mother and Father had never noticed her initial reaction, and she could control herself better later. "He's not a cad. Ask anyone at court, other than Mother and Father, of course. They're too blinded by the ridiculous feud."

Alex glowered at Lord Ravenstone, who began greeting other guests. "Are they? Since Father identified Lord Ravenstone during a horse auction at Aherne's the first week of the season, I've seen Lord Ravenstone at events for gentlemen, but he never acknowledges me."

She shook her head and sipped her sparkling wine. Provoking reactions from people amused her brash younger brother, particularly when they attempted to ignore him. And he could always decipher the pranks or quips that would best provoke someone—especially Mother and Father. Once she'd blossomed, they'd often ignored him to focus on using her to further their ambitions. So Alex had time to develop tactics certain to provoke them, from dipping her hair in ink when he was six, to declaring politics boring when he was seventeen. But provoking a Ravenstone likewise wasn't prudent.

She arched her brows at Alex. "Were you glowering at the

count the way you are now? Given the feud, I'd ignore you too if I were him."

Alex scowled. "I was perfectly civil—mostly. I may have jested we cross swords to settle the feud a time or two. But I smiled when I did to show I didn't actually care about the feud."

Her breath freezing, Annalise almost gaped. Challenging Lord Ravenstone was far beyond Alex's usual brashness. No wonder the genial count had ignored him. "Are you *mad*? A duel between a Greysnowe and a Ravenstone is certain to end in tragedy and inflame the feud. Besides, Lord Ravenstone is one of the most skilled swordsmen in Calatini and could easily trounce you."

Alex shrugged as he finished his sparkling wine. "His skill is why I wanted to cross swords. Such a bout should be exciting, and I might learn some new swordplay."

She laid her hand on Alex's arm and leaned toward him with a beseeching smile. Somehow, she must convince him to give up that mad scheme. "Please don't challenge Lord Ravenstone again. I couldn't bear if you were wounded or wounded the count."

His eyes narrow, Alex scrutinized her for a long moment. Then he smirked and patted her hand. "I shan't be wounded."

Annalise stiffened. She'd not convinced him at all. Perhaps she should recount all the strife between the Greysnowes and Ravenstones since the failed betrothal three centuries ago had started the feud. Her stomach clenched. A failed betrothal because a soul healer had jilted her Ravenstone betrothed once she formed a soulbond with his fatally wounded cousin and best friend.

She'd opened her mouth to begin when the Duke of Oakmoor strode over. Mother and Father must have encouraged the rake-hell duke to pursue her during their conversation, probably hoping a dance with him would make King Devon jealous.

The duke swept a florid bow, the white motes flickering in his charming yellow aura. He was another of the few with magic

at court, although his erratic magic had only appeared last year. Unusual, considering the powers of most witches finished developing when their bodies fully matured. His overpowering sandalwood scent swamping her, the duke kissed her hand with a smoldering glance. "Dare I hope your first dance is still unclaimed, Lady Annalise?"

Her skin tightening, she tugged her hand free. Empty flirting like the duke's was why she disliked court. If only she could refuse him. Yet if she did, Mother and Father would complain about it for the next week. Swallowing a sigh, she smiled at the duke and inclined her head. "My first dance is yours if you want it."

The Duke of Oakmoor offered his arm and purred, "Shall we?"

Almost sighing again, Annalise laid her fingers on his arm, and they glided out onto the floor. At least the rakehell duke couldn't do more than flirt in the middle of a crowded ballroom.

CHAPTER 2



When the intriguing Lady Annalise began dancing with the suave Duke of Oakmoor, Dare stiffened and couldn't help watching her as he continued greeting other guests. Goddess, she was radiant, especially in that shimmering, soft-white ballgown. Despite the enmity between Ravenstones and Greysnowes for the past eleven generations, Lady Annalise drew him like a lodestone whenever they met. Not because of the otherworldly beauty which made her the most beautiful lady in Calatini, but because of the deep kindness and serene strength that imbued her every action as well as the love of nature and potent magic she'd revealed at their secret encounter during their first season.

He suppressed a sigh then greeted Lord Treyvan and his wife, the former Miss Midor he'd briefly courted when she was first presented. In the six years since meeting Lady Annalise, he'd never met another lady so likeminded and perfect for him, although Lady Treyvan had almost come close. As a powerful nature witch, having a kind and strong wife who loved nature was essential. Only such a lady would enjoy the same outdoor pursuits and understand his acceptance of all living things and

his growing menagerie of horses, hellhounds, angelcats, and, one day soon, draklizards. Which Lady Annalise would.

Moving past the Treyvans, Dare allowed himself to glance at Lady Annalise twirling about the floor as graceful as an ethereal siren during a courtship flight. Despite her perfect behavior at court, she always appeared most contented outdoors—much more than other ladies, except for Mother, who was a nature witch like him. Lady Annalise beamed whenever riding, so she'd relish hours riding with her husband. And she'd a growing menagerie of her own—her massive, pale-gray stallion who most ladies wouldn't dare ride, her angelcat Finn who she'd rescued at their unforgettable secret encounter, and likely two faebirds from the sapphire and amethyst feathers she sometimes wore in her white-blond hair.

He smiled as warmth flooded his chest. Lady Annalise's menagerie revealed her deep kindness too. Considering how her stallion responded to her, the massive horse adored her, so she must lavish him with affection. And from the few white hairs always adorning her gowns, she must cuddle Finn often like an affectionate angelcat would crave. Also keeping two fragile faebirds, who required another faebird and constant tending to thrive, revealed a steadfast devotion.

Still darting glances at Lady Annalise, Dare greeted Sir Ellis Campbell and his wife Lady Helena Campbell, friends from Lady Ducharme's fencing salon. In addition to Lady Annalise's pets, her conduct at court proved her kindness. Although a beauty like her could easily needle others without censure, she treated everyone with calm consideration. Perhaps like him, she could see how harming others would be akin to harming herself since her magical powers somehow impacted nature. Not that he knew precisely what class of witch she was.

After assuring the Campbells he'd attend Lady Ducharme's again soon, he continued about the ballroom and kept glancing at Lady Annalise. Although the blinding white glow of powerful

magic had surrounded her when they'd met, her spell had been mostly hidden. She wasn't a nature witch—alike witches could recognize their own—but her spell *had* impacted nature. As powerful Rhiannon descendants, he and Mother were sensitive to those types of magic even though most other nature witches weren't. Without a probing spell to analyze active magic, he could still sense when a witch healer invoked healing sight, a sea witch calmed the waves, a werebeast shifted between forms, or other spells affecting nature.

Smoothing his beard to conceal his wry smile, Dare greeted Lord Islaye, Mother's childhood friend and the Minister of Magic who also represented Magehaven, the other northern duchy neighboring his beloved Wildewall. Although he could have performed a difficult aura spell to determine Lady Annalise's magical abilities, he never had because 'twould be an intrusion. And since they'd not truly spoken since their secret encounter before they'd known their families were ancestral enemies, Lady Annalise had never told him about her magic. Yet he knew she was a powerful witch, probably a Rhiannon descendant like him.

Dare almost sighed as he left Lord Islaye while still watching Lady Annalise. Even without knowing her class of witch, the invisible allure of her magic made his chest ache. Only another Rhiannon descendant could understand how natural using magic was for them. Since they could perform magic with will alone and usually set their spells' magical costs, they could use everyday magic without worry, unlike other witches or humans without magic. Having a wife with powers equaling or surpassing his own would be wonderful, especially if her powers involved nature too. Then they could discuss magic and create spells together like Mother could never do with Father despite their deep love.

When the Duke of Oakmoor pulled Lady Annalise close enough to kiss near the end of their dance, Dare's pulse flared, and he almost scowled at the rakehell duke. Entitled gentlemen

like the duke invariably assumed Lady Annalise's potent allure meant she'd welcome their advances, no matter how scandalous. Which she clearly didn't, from how she glided back from the duke with a cool smile. Court would see her refusal as another instance supporting her nickname Lady Snow.

He suppressed a snort. For all their love of gossip, court could be remarkably blind. Lady Snow was merely a mask Lady Annalise wore at court. When carefree like at that park all those years ago, her warm and radiant smile revealed her kind heart and made her even more irresistible. But she never exhibited that genuine smile at court, probably to protect herself from gossip and overeager suitors. And since her serene mask never cracked despite court's constant scrutiny, she was stronger than a hardy ash on a riverbank. Another ideal quality in a wife.

As the dance ended with the duke bowing and Lady Annalise curtsying, Dare forced himself to turn away. Goddess help him, he *must* quit watching her the few times they attended the same court events. No one had noticed his interest yet, or if they had, they'd assumed 'twas due to the Ravenstone-Greysnowe feud rather than attraction. But one day, someone would, and 'twould engender embarrassing gossip that could only feed the feud. Because of that centuries-long feud, her parents would *never* accept him courting or marrying her, although they couldn't forbid it since he and Lady Annalise were past the age of majority.

He almost shook his head. Instead, the ambitious fools threw Lady Annalise at King Devon as well as any unwed duke or duke's heir, regardless of how those gentlemen suited their daughter. Likely so the Greysnowes could best his family with her advantageous marriage. Lady Annalise's family were always pursuing the ridiculous feud, and they'd probably never end it despite all his attempts to seek peace.

Dare grimaced. Since becoming count three years ago after Father's hunting accident, he'd approached Lord Greysnowe at the start of every season to work toward forgiving the strife of

the past and building acceptance for the future, but the other count had continually rebuffed him. And Lady Greysnowe's glares whenever she saw him resembled that of an irate gorgon, so he'd never attempted approaching her. Although just eighteen and new to court, their son Lord Alexander appeared to support the feud as much as his parents—after Dare's attempt to end the feud at Aherne's this season, Lord Alexander had pestered him to cross swords.

He sighed, his heart clenching. Despite their intense affinity and attraction, he must forget the intriguing Lady Annalise, so he could court other ladies. Every season since he was eighteen except for the one after Father died, he'd visited Ormas to find a wife because none back home appealed. Yet no ladies at court had truly appealed either—except Lady Annalise. And since nature witches despised living in cities, he'd never lasted the entire six months of the season, even when Father had been alive and insisted he attend. Living around so many humans was stifling, and the magic here was too cultivated and harder for him to wield—nothing like the wild magic permeating Wildewall's magical glens, enchanted lakes, and vision summits.

He swallowed another sigh. If Mother was here, she might have been able to help his frustrating hunt, so he could finally quit attending court. But she'd always refused to visit Ormas, even when Father had begged her to join him. She'd visited Ormas once as a child and hated it so much that she always said nature witches didn't belong here. So Dare had never bothered to ask Mother to join him at court, despite longing for her help finding a wife. Instead, he'd obtained her advice during their weekly mirror calls like he had this morning. Although he'd never dared admit his impossible attraction to Lady Annalise. Mother didn't support the feud any more than he did, but she'd never met the Greysnowes, so she didn't understand the depth of their rancor. She'd encourage him to pursue Lady Annalise, which 'twould only feed the feud.

As King Devon took Lady Annalise's arm from the Duke of

Oakmoor, Dare scanned the ballroom for a lady he could ask to dance. He'd turned twenty-four on his natalday over a month ago, so he was now the same age Father had been when he'd been born, and Father had been married a year before that. He couldn't keep delaying marriage. Soon, all the unwed ladies at court would be much too young for him.

He set his jaw. This season he *wasn't* returning to Wildewall until he'd found a bride, no matter how much he despised town life. But he'd already been in Ormas almost three months this season, and he'd yet to find a lady he might want to marry besides Lady Annalise, whom he'd not even seen until tonight since he'd avoided events she and her family might attend. Perhaps forcing himself to remain for the rest of this season would convince his heart to settle for a suitable lady. Although those three and a half months would likely be tortuous.

His gaze landed on Miss Winston sipping sparkling wine in her habitual chair near the chaperones and dowagers. Despite her cad of a brother Herrick Winston, her nonexistent dowry, and being a few years older, Miss Winston was pleasant and enjoyed living in the country as much as he did. She was no witch, but most at court weren't, and she'd an appealing interest in alchemy that other ladies didn't. So he strode over and swept a bow. "Would you care to dance?"

Miss Winston nodded and set aside her flute of sparkling wine to accept his hand.

As they joined the other couples including King Devon and Lady Annalise, Dare grinned at Miss Winston. They'd not danced since the Campbells' first ball two months ago early on in the season. "How do you find the season so far?"

Miss Winston grimaced as he twirled her across the floor. "As dull as ever. If only I'd an excuse to return to the country. But until I magically find a husband, my parents shall never allow that."

He sighed. Poor Miss Winston to be trapped by her family and situation. If only *he* could be that magic husband. But like

usual, no attraction or potential love burned between them—she felt more like a sister than anything. 'Twas why he'd never proposed to her before. He flashed a warm smile. "Perhaps you should use your interest in alchemy to your advantage. Surely in a city as large and affluent as Ormas, you can find someone to hire you. And if you earn enough money, you can move anywhere you wish."

Humming, Miss Winston tilted her head. "A lady working as an alchemist would be a scandal, but perhaps I should consider it. Since 'tis my ninth season at court, clearly no gentleman shall ever offer for me."

Dare winced and leaned toward her. Had his lack of interest hurt her? She was too nice to deserve that. "I would if I could, but..."

Miss Winston chuckled then squeezed his arm. "If you did, I'd refuse. Kissing you would be almost like kissing Herrick." She grimaced. "And making children together would be worse."

He echoed her chuckle, his chest easing. Thank the Goddess she recognized that. Then he asked her about her latest alchemy studies and offered her some advice based on his land magic involving nonliving nature. Not that he revealed the source of his knowledge. Others realizing his powers might complicate his hunt for a wife—some would fawn and become desperate for him to marry into their family, while others would shun and gossip about him. Court could never decide if they adored or despised witches for their magical powers that other humans didn't possess.

After his dance with Miss Winston, Dare escorted her to the refreshments table, but as he handed her a flute of sparkling wine, Lord Alexander charged toward them. Although his tousled hair was sandy rather than white-blond, his eyes plain blue rather than cerulean, and his expression irate rather than serene, Lord Alexander still resembled his sister Lady Annalise. The young hellion was probably about to pester him to cross

swords again to further the feud. Yet on previous encounters, the boy had done so with a smirk, not a scowl.

Miss Winston eyed the seething Lord Alexander then muttered, "Excuse me." She darted back to her chair by the chaperones and dowagers. Wise of her to flee. If only he could too.

Dare inhaled and straightened. Not that he would. He'd never end the feud and build connections with the Greysnowes if he avoided them when they approached. He flashed a genial smile to placate Lord Alexander.

The young lord's eyes narrowed further. "I've always believed Father's rancor toward the Ravenstones ridiculous, but your behavior tonight makes me suspect he might be right, after all."

Dare stiffened, a chill prickling his neck. Had Lord Alexander been the first to notice his interest in Lady Annalise? Not good. He clung to his smile. "What do you mean?"

His jaw twitching, Lord Alexander leaned toward him. "You know, rakehell."

Dare winced. Damnation. Lady Annalise's brother *had* noticed. And was furious about it too. The younger gentleman probably assumed his interest wasn't sincere because of the feud.

Lord Alexander fisted his hands. "Your words of building acceptance and forgiving the past were clearly nothing more than an excuse to seduce my sister. Such cads deserve punishment." He leaned even closer, his voice deepening, "I demand satisfaction."

Dare swallowed as his stomach lurched. Another duel between a Ravenstone and a Greysnowe, especially one fueled by fraternal protectiveness, would definitely feed the feud and was the opposite of everything he sought to build as a nature witch who respected all life. He smiled and raised his palms. "I apologize for appearing to insult Lady Annalise. I didn't mean to stare, but I find her irresistibly intriguing. I'd seek to court her if your parents would accept it."

Lord Alexander growled. "They won't. So don't stare again, Ravenstone."

Dare inclined his head then pivoted and strode over to Miss Hawke, a distant cousin to Lord Treyvan who'd come out this season. Hopefully, dancing with the bubbly lady would distract both him and Lord Alexander from his interest in Lady Annalise. He couldn't allow the feud to grow.