

## PROLOGUE



*A*fter Lauds at dawn then organizing the hundred-twenty priests and novices serving at Ormas's almskitchens like he did every morning, Mel strode from the Great Temple's chapter house to finally eat breakfast. However, before he reached the dining hall in the center of the priest quarters, Paul, a rabbity temple priest who'd just been ordained last Longnight, scurried toward him with a note.

Thanking Paul, Mel blinked at his name in Hawke's bold scrawl then continued to the dining hall. A note from his younger brother this early was unusual. Was Hawke writing to explain his peculiar behavior over the past month and at Mother's fete last week? Or was he simply writing about a drastic change in the inheritance Mel had Hawke invest two years ago like Hawke had done his own?

Despite his questions, Mel waited until after he'd fetched breakfast to open Hawke's note. Then he hummed as he read the brief note while stirring three heaping spoons of honey into his tea. Hawke only requested that he visit early today without explaining why. Whatever Hawke wanted to discuss must be urgent but too private to put in writing.

So Mel devoured his breakfast then hurried to Hawke's

townhouse. When Hobb opened the door, he gave the butler a warm smile. "Good morning, Hobb. Hawke requested I visit at once."

Hobb's lips twitched as he ushered Mel inside. "Of course, Priest Melchior."

Mel frowned when the butler left him in the empty morning room. Why hadn't Hobb taken him directly to Hawke like usual? Surely Hawke was ready for visitors since he'd sent that note over an hour ago.

Then he blinked and leapt upright when Hawke and Wren swept into the morning room. Wren was here too? Mel blushed. And why did she and Hawke look disheveled?

Hawke flashed a crooked grin as he sat on the sofa opposite of Mel then drew Wren in his lap. "Thanks for visiting us so soon."

Eyeing them, Mel sat as well. Their intimacy was contrary to Hawke's protests that he and Wren were just friends when Mel and their elder brother Aragon had questioned Hawke at The Gold Griffin a few days ago. What had made Hawke and Wren admit their love at long last?

Blushing, Wren laid her hands on Hawke's. "I suppose you can guess why we requested you visit."

Mel couldn't help chuckling. "You need a priest to marry you. 'Tis about time."

As Wren blushed harder, Hawke merely smiled then replied, "We want a bloodbinding."

Mel nodded. Not surprising Hawke and Wren wanted a bloodbinding that would magically bind their life forces until death. They'd been in love forever, and they didn't need to worry about heirs like Aragon and Aragon's wife Selena did. And although no witch, Mel could still perform the magic required for a bloodbinding, thanks to the Goddess's blessing when he'd been ordained nearly three years ago.

Hawke's eyes narrowed. "And we're only inviting family and

close friends to our wedding ceremony—no matter what Mother wants."

Humming, Mel nodded again. Although the shy Wren would want a small wedding, Mother doubtless wanted all of court to attend since she enjoyed social events. Fortunately for Wren, Hawke was stubborn enough to resist Mother, unlike most. "I'll check when one of the chapels at the Great Temple is free."

Wren shifted in Hawke's lap. "If one isn't free this week, we should marry here instead. We must move quickly to quiet the gossip at court."

Mel frowned. Why would Hawke and Wren finally marrying cause gossip at court? "Gossip?"

As Hawke scowled, Wren wrinkled her nose and replied, "I'm surprised you haven't heard. I thought even the nightmara delegation must be gossiping about my scandalous pregnancy."

Inhaling, Mel stared at them. Wren was pregnant already? An almost imperceptible pang darted through him. With Selena also pregnant, he was the only one of his brothers who wouldn't soon be a father. And he likely never would be since he'd never met a lady he could love who loved him in return, and without love, the Goddess wouldn't approve his marriage. Shoving that aside, he beamed at Hawke and Wren. "Congratulations! Mother and Father and the Keyes must be thrilled, even though you anticipated your marriage vows. But how did court find out?"

When Hawke's scowl darkened, Wren squeezed his hands then smiled at Mel. "Kit overheard our mothers discussing it. Then she promptly told all of court about my scandalous pregnancy."

Mel stiffened, his chest tightening. Since becoming the fashionable Countess of Blaine over six years ago, their alluring, former neighbor Kit had often gossiped—like when she'd told everyone about Selena before Selena's presentation ball since foreknowledge of Mother's plans impressed court. Yet although indiscreet, that gossip hadn't hurt anyone and had probably even enhanced Selena's presentation. But gossiping about Wren's

scandalous pregnancy was different. That gained Kit nothing except hurting Wren, the childhood rival Kit adored needling. And hurting Wren hurt Mel's brother too.

He swallowed. The tender girl who'd enjoyed attending services worshipping the Goddess and visiting poor villagers with him would never have been so mean. Marrying Mother's elderly cousin to become the Countess of Blaine and being fashionable at court since her first season had changed Kit beyond all recognition. Or had it been Lord Blaine's death last year that had changed her? He managed a smile. "I'm sorry Kit was so mean."

As Wren shrugged, Hawke grunted then gritted, "Only to be expected, given how she ruined our Longnight kiss eight years ago."

Mel froze. That life-changing Longnight had been when he'd told Mother and Father he meant to become a priest and when Hawke had planned to surprise Wren with a romantic Longnight kiss. But after that Longnight, Hawke had begun pretending he and Wren were just friends. Mel leaned toward them. "How did Kit ruin your Longnight kiss?"

Hawke's pale-blue eyes flared. "Kit told Wren I'd kissed her the day before—a cruel lie. Because of it, Wren assumed I wasn't serious and spurned my kiss with such vehemence I couldn't bear considering her in a romantic light again."

Mel inhaled. That certainly explained Hawke's stubborn insistence he and Wren were just friends these past eight years. How could Kit have been so spiteful and cruel? His heart twisted. And her cruel lie had been *before* she'd become the fashionable Countess of Blaine. Perhaps Kit had never been the devout and tender girl he'd believed she was. He fisted his hands in his priest robes. Or perhaps her vile father had already destroyed that girl by then.

Turning in Hawke's lap, Wren caressed his face. "You should forgive Kit like I did yesterday. After all, she wasn't entirely to blame for our disastrous Longnight kiss. We were both too young and scared to fight for our love."

When Hawke lowered his head to kiss Wren, Mel blushed then leapt upright. He should give them privacy. "I'll write once I find out when a chapel is free."

He strode from Hawke's townhouse but headed to Blaine House rather than the Great Temple. He must confront Kit about her cruel behavior.



THE MORNING after Wren had magnanimously forgiven her for lying about Hawke, Kit woke late with another vicious megrim throbbing inside her skull—her fifth of the nauseating, severe headaches this month. Not activating the witchlights in her chambers or opening the curtains, she gulped a megrim tonic. Hopefully, 'twould help today, even though they didn't half the time. Waiting for the tonic to work, she remained sequestered in her darkened chambers. She hated letting others see her when she was so vulnerable, a remnant of life with Father. Somehow he'd always sensed when she was suffering a megrim and saved his cruellest insults for then.

She sighed as she dropped into her plushest chair. Thank the Goddess her late husband Lord Blaine had been nothing like Father—Lord Blaine had always made sure she had quiet and pampering during her megrims. Familiar tears pricked her eyes. If only she could have been a true wife to him. He'd deserved so much better than her.

She was dozing when her maid Willa touched her shoulder and said, "Priest Melchior Hawke is in the morning room to see you, my lady. Shall I send him away?"

Kit straightened, her sudden movement making blood throb in her head. What was Mel doing downstairs? Since she'd

enticed Lord Blaine into marrying her at seventeen to escape Father, Mel had never once visited her. She only saw him at family events—Lord Blaine had been a cousin of Mel's mother, the influential Duchess of Childe. Whatever Mel was here to discuss must be serious. She swallowed then rose. "No, I'll see him."

She made her way downstairs, despite the blinding summer sunshine streaming inside the townhouse stabbing her eyes. Her treacherous heart fluttering like always when she saw Mel even with her megrim, she glided into the morning room and gave him a tight smile. "To what do I owe the honor of your priestly presence this morning? Don't you have some unfortunates to save instead?"

None of his normal kindness warming his deep-brown eyes, Mel rose and scrutinized her. "I had to speak with you first."

Kit tensed at the unusual anger reverberating in his soft words. What of her shameful secrets had he discovered? That Father had always despised and belittled her? Or that the gambling sot had been right to despise his wicked and vulgar daughter? Or that she was still a virgin after five years of marriage and habitual flirting? Feigning nonchalance, she sank into the chair opposite of Mel then gestured for him to sit. "Go on then."

Mel returned to his chair, his handsome face set in stern lines. "Kit, why have you continually attempted to sabotage Hawke and Wren's love?"

Her nauseous stomach tightening, she studied her nails since tossing her head would just exacerbate her megrim. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Mel snorted. "No? Shall we review your latest attempt? You told all of court about Wren's pregnancy, which made her and Hawke's involvement a scandal. Why? Since Wren rarely attends court, gossiping about her gained you nothing."

Kit kept studying her nails as her megrim throbbed in rhythm with her heart. A worthy person like Mel would have

remained silent about Wren's scandalous pregnancy, but sharing that the perfect Wren had erred for once had been too tempting for her to forgo. Raising her gaze, she lifted a shoulder. "Telling people amused me."

His jaw clenched, Mel leaned forward. "Like it amused you to flirt with Hawke since you came out of mourning last month? That also gained you nothing."

Eyeing Mel beneath her lashes, she pursed a coy smile. True, although she couldn't resist needling the besotted Wren and the equally besotted Hawke, who had both refused to admit their obvious love until now. A pang darted through her. Wren didn't know how fortunate she was to have her love returned. Unlike hers had been. Not that she loved Mel any longer. That had been a girlhood fantasy.

Clinging to her coy smile as her megrim sharpened, she flicked her fingers. "Flirting with Hawke was a mere lark. I was never seriously pursuing him. My next husband must be wealthy and titled like Lord Blaine—I can't lose the status I gained with my first marriage."

Mel fisted his hands in his dark-brown priest robes. "How can you be so grasping and cold? What happened to the tender girl who enjoyed attending services and visiting poor villagers?"

Kit stilled as Father's derision when he discovered those visits echoed through her. To conceal her initial reaction, she smirked and smoothed the sophisticated gown that flattered her lush curves. Even at home suffering a megrim, she always wore the best. "She grew up."

His eyes turning darker than his coal-brown hair, Mel gritted, "I suppose part of that growing up was telling Wren a cruel lie about kissing Hawke."

She froze, her heart wrenching and megrim throbbing. Of course Wren and Hawke had told Mel that shameful secret. The one she'd *never* wanted Mel to discover. He'd despise her for hurting his beloved brother so. She made herself sniff. "That was

just a jest—one I assumed the perfect couple would undo within moments."

Mel stiffened. "Your *jest* turned Hawke into a rakehell. He and Wren would have married years ago if you hadn't interfered."

Suppressing a wince, Kit lifted her chin. Doubtless true, but she wasn't completely to blame. "My jest would have been undone if Wren and Hawke had simply talked to each other."

Mel eyed her, his gaze cold. "True, but don't you feel any remorse for the hurt you caused them?"

She swallowed but impassively returned his gaze. Of course she did. But she'd not admit such vulnerability to anyone, not even Mel. "Remorse doesn't change the past."

Mel leapt to his feet. "Perhaps not, but it does help you atone and prevent you from repeating past mistakes." He stared down at her. "Clearly, the tender girl I believed I knew was nothing but an illusion." He swept a bow. "Goodbye, Lady Blaine."

As Mel strode from the morning room, Kit gazed after him, and the ache in her chest eclipsed her throbbing megrim. She'd been right that he'd despise her once he discovered how wicked she truly was. Exactly like Father did. And now that Mel's good opinion of her was shattered, she'd likely never rebuild it. She fisted a hand above her heart. She never should have interfered with Wren and Hawke's relationship—the cost had been too dear.

Then Kit stiffened her spine. But no sense crying for spilt unicorn water, and Mel's good opinion hardly mattered. He attended court as rarely as Wren did, so his distaste wouldn't ruin her chance to entice a new husband, which she must manage before her stepson Edouard asked Pippa to marry him. She couldn't be a dowager countess once he married. Fortunately, she'd already selected her next husband—the genial Lord Ravenstone. She rose to return to her darkened chambers. She must simply redouble her efforts to catch the rugged count.

## CHAPTER 1



Three and a half months later, Kit suppressed the urge to fidget as she waited in the anteroom beside the entrance hall for the Duke of Oakmoor to escort her to the much-anticipated ball that Mel's mother was hosting to open the Long-night season. The rakehell duke had been escorting her to court events since last month when she'd discovered he was finally seeking a wife—thanks to overhearing a conversation between her former favorite Lord Ravenstone and the beauteous Lady Annalise. After overhearing them together, she'd abandoned her pursuit of the rugged count because he and Lady Annalise were secretly in love despite their families being ancestral enemies, and he'd not make an acceptable husband for anyone else.

She smoothed the flattering, arachne silk ballgown that she'd purchased from Celeste's and turned it crimson, like the ripest Goddess laurel apples, using a drop of blood. Although not as kind as Lord Ravenstone, the suave Duke of Oakmoor was a much better match for her even though he was twice her age. Both wealthy and influential, the still hale duke remained in Ormas much of the year since he served on the council as the Minister of Foreign Relations, and he hosted court events often, something she excelled at and enjoyed.

The touch of gray at his temples gleaming amid his brown hair the sole hint of his age, the Duke of Oakmoor strode into the anteroom then swept a deft bow and kissed her hand with a smoldering glance. "I hope I've not kept you waiting too long, Lady Blaine."

Her stomach tightening, Kit freed her hand but fluttered her lashes at the duke as she rose. To catch him, she must play the perfect court lady, always coy yet seeking an alliance rather than love. The infamous rakehell wouldn't appreciate a nagging wife who protested his many affairs. Which she wouldn't be. Smiling, she slid her arm through the duke's. "Not at all. Edouard just left moments ago to fetch Pippa."

The duke chuckled as he escorted her from Blaine House to his carriage. "Of course he did. I suppose it shan't be long before Lord Blaine asks Miss Hawke to marry him."

Since the duke adored intrigue, she mewed and claimed, "Yes, although I've been delaying him." Truthfully, her stepson took everything at a deliberate pace, especially courtship. Edouard had clearly liked Pippa, who was also Mel's cousin but on the opposite side, when they'd first met at Aragon and Selena's wedding last year shortly before his father had died, but he'd waited until Pippa's come out this season to quietly court her. Kit tossed her head. "I can't bear the thought of being *just* the dowager countess."

The Duke of Oakmoor chuckled again as he handed her into his carriage. "Perhaps someone shall rescue you by marrying you first."

As the duke sat beside her and draped an arm about her, she forced herself to lean into his embrace despite the chill skittering across her skin. Although older like her late husband, the duke was still in his prime of life and had never married, so he needed an heir, unlike Lord Blaine had. The duke would expect intimacy from her—he wouldn't leave her untouched when he discovered his young bride froze like under a stone spell at a mere kiss. Thankfully, the duke would

expend his passion with his mistresses once she bore him an heir.

His sandalwood scent making her stomach quiver, Kit swallowed and squeezed the duke's knee. "I'd love if a duke rescued me."

The duke rumbled a laugh and laid his hand on hers. "Perhaps one might."

To curb their flirting before it led to a kiss, she asked, "Are you anticipating the Duchess of Childe's ball tonight?" The duchess's Longnight ball was the first held at court in decades since the season usually ended at Harvestfete over two months ago. However, the felicitous appearance of King Devon's betrothed Lady Kiera and the continued nightmara negotiations had extended the season this year because the council remained in session, and court wouldn't leave Ormas until the most influential nobles did too. Kit tilted her head. "The duchess is sure to have interesting festivities arranged."

Humming, the Duke of Oakmoor nodded. "She does provide interesting amusements at her events, like that play she had her pregnant, soon-to-be daughter-in-law write for her fete celebrating her and the duke's *first* grandchild." He threaded his fingers through Kit's. "Although your events are much more diverting—your water party and fire ball were both unique."

She purred a sultry laugh and made herself caress the duke's palm with her thumb. "Now if only I could manage an air concert or earth rout."

The duke turned and grasped her chin with his free hand. He leaned toward her, his hazel gaze ardent. "I'm sure you shall one day."

Kit froze as her pulse pounded and stomach roiled. Dear Goddess, the duke was about to kiss her for the first time in their courtship. Please let her not turn to stone like she had with Lord Blaine.

But before the duke could lean closer, the carriage halted at Childe's House.

As the duke chuckled and released her chin, she managed not to sag but instead eked a weak smile.

The Duke of Oakmoor leapt from the carriage then helped her alight. He kissed her palm. "We'll continue this later. We can't miss the Duchess of Childe's Longnight ball."

Swallowing, Kit fluttered her lashes at the duke. "No matter how much we might long to—missing one of the Duchess of Childe's events would destroy even the most fashionable at court."

The duke chuckled again. "Doubtless true. But perhaps one day we should test that." Then he smiled and escorted her into the crowded ballroom.

The Duchess of Childe beamed at Kit as her husband and the Duke of Oakmoor exchanged greetings. "How gorgeous you look tonight. And such a bold choice too—most ladies are wearing green, gold, or white to celebrate the Longnight season."

Kit lifted a shoulder. True, but the fashionable Countess of Blaine was known for her bold and sultry gowns, and she mustn't disappoint her coterie. They'd abandon her otherwise. "Crimson suits me." Plus, the color of ripe Goddess laurel apples was her favorite. She smiled at Mel's mother. "Has everyone arrived yet?"

The duchess tilted her head. "Nearly everyone except Devon and Kiera, but we'll probably start the dancing without them." She nodded at her three sons and their two wives near the refreshments table. "I'm not certain how long Aragon and Selena, Hawke and Wren, or Mel shall stay. Pregnant ladies tire early, and Mel has duties at the Great Temple in the morning."

Her heart quickening, Kit followed the duchess's nod. Mel grinned between his brothers, who each had a possessive arm wrapped about his pregnant wife. Although Mel was two years younger than Aragon and two years older than Hawke, the three brothers so strongly resembled their father with the same dark hair and strong features that they appeared triplets, except only Mel and Aragon had inherited the duke's dark eyes. Yet Mel was

still the handsomest of the three due to the deep compassion that glowed in his heartwarming smile.

As if he could sense her stare, Mel glanced across the ballroom and met her gaze. His grin faded, and the tight expression he'd worn when they'd last spoken flickered across his face. Without acknowledging her, he pivoted toward Wren and Hawke then gave them a warm smile.

She swallowed, her chest twisting. Since Mel had discovered how wicked she truly was over three months ago, he'd ignored her like that at the two other court events they'd both attended. She'd definitely never rebuild his good opinion. She must learn to ignore him like he ignored her. She dragged her gaze back to his parents.

Her brow creased, the duchess eyed Kit. "Do you have another megrim?"

Kit tensed as Mel's father and the Duke of Oakmoor eyed her as well. Of course Mel's perceptive mother had noticed her upset at his distaste. Now her future husband did too and would watch her closer the rest of the evening. She'd best not glance at Mel again so the duke didn't see her reaction and wonder why. He might ask Mel about her, and Mel might reveal some of his distaste. Plus, thanks to Mel's mother, her future husband now knew about her megrims, a flaw she'd not wanted him to learn until after they married.

She managed a blinding smile for the duchess and two dukes. "I feel fine. I'm simply eager for the interesting festivities you've arranged, your grace."

The duchess hummed. "Nothing special tonight—just Longnight reels along with Longnight decorations and desserts."

The Duke of Childe flashed his usual crooked grin. "'Wouldn't do to shock court at the beginning of the Longnight season.'"

Mel's mother shooed Kit and the Duke of Oakmoor toward the refreshments table, which Mel and his brothers and sisters-

in-law had fortunately left. "Go fetch some refreshments before the dancing starts. It shan't be long."

As the Duke of Oakmoor escorted Kit across the ballroom, he scrutinized her, his gaze probing. "You suffer megrims?"

Kit shrugged then murmured, "Only occasionally." In truth, her vicious megrims had increased to around one a week since she'd rejoined court after her year of mourning this summer. Doubtless the stress of acting as the fashionable Countess of Blaine and hunting a new husband as well as the resulting poor sleep was responsible. But surely her megrims would lessen once she was securely married to the duke. She smiled at him through her lashes. "They're hardly worth mentioning."

The duke inclined his head then handed her a mug of spiced cider without asking before fetching a flute of sparkling wine for himself. During their month-long courtship, he'd already learned she much preferred spiced cider to sparkling wine or shokolat. If it had been fashionable, she'd drink it all year long, like she did cinnaspice tea.

As she and the duke glided about the ballroom greeting other guests, she sipped her spiced cider and inhaled its steam. The delicious blend of cinnaspice and apples reminiscent of Goddess laurels soon eased her tension at the duke's near kiss, Mel's distaste, and the duke discovering one of her secrets.

She glanced about the ballroom to find everyone. Mel was still with his brothers and their wives, but they were now beneath the musicians' balcony. She wrenched her gaze free before she could brood then continued checking the ballroom. Their blond hair reflecting the dazzling witchlights, her twin stepchildren Edouard and Elise, who were actually several months her senior, stood near a garden balcony. As they talked and laughed, Edouard had his arm threaded through Pippa's, while Elise lovingly held her husband Lord Farson's arm with their teenage ward Arvan, the Duke of Golddell, between them and Pippa's brothers. Elise and Lord Farson must have brought the young duke since tonight's ball was hosted by family.

The Duke of Oakmoor arched a brow once they finished greeting the temperate Duchess of Wildewall, another of the king's councilors like him, Aragon, and Lord Farson. "Shall we greet your stepchildren next?"

Kit almost winced. Although Elise was always gracious, Edouard had trouble concealing his dislike. Even before she'd enticed their father into marrying her, Edouard had considered her grasping and brazen. And her stepson's deep dislike might give the duke doubts about marrying her, so she attempted to avoid Edouard when with the duke.

Fortunately, the beginning strains of the first Longnight reel began before she could reply.

Handing her near empty mug to a servant, she tugged the duke toward the floor. "We can greet Edouard and Elise after we dance."

The Duke of Oakmoor gave his flute of sparkling wine to the servant as well before leading her to the center of the dancers to form a set with the duke's fellow councilor Lady Ducharme and her husband. Then the duke drew Kit as close as the vigorous reel full of hops and sprightly steps would allow.

She swallowed and resisted the need to pull back to the proper distance. She couldn't protest that the rakehell duke courting her held her slightly too close. Especially given her habitual flirting. Instead, she pursed a coy smile and caressed his arm as they began to dance.