

## CHAPTER 1



While Edouard processed down the aisle as his cousin Aragon's third groom witness, a beaming young lady near the front on the groom's side caught his eye, and he nearly stilled. The morning sun streaming through the many stained-glass windows of the Great Temple illuminated the young lady, making her creamy skin glow, kindling the warm shimmer in her upswept chestnut hair, and brightening her peach gown. He couldn't help smiling at the young lady's sweet and radiant joy—the opposite of his sober nature.

Their gazes met when he passed, and her warm-brown eyes widened before she beamed straight at him. He inhaled, his heart fluttering for the first time in his life. He *must* meet her at the reception after Aragon and Selena's wedding ceremony hosted by Aragon's wealthy and influential parents, the Duke and Duchess of Childes.

As Aragon's priest brother Mel performed the ceremony, Edouard kept darting glances at the bubbly young lady. On her right was a rumpled older gentleman with similar chestnut hair, and on her left were Dane and Xavier Hawke, distant paternal cousins of Aragon and his brothers, who were a year or two younger than Edouard. Dane and Xavier had mentioned a little

sister, doubtless the young lady, although he'd never met Miss Philippa Hawke since she wasn't out yet. The older gentleman must be their father Sir Julian, an eccentric recluse who never attended court events.

Soon, Aragon and Selena's grand yet brief ceremony ended, and Edouard followed them from the nave with the other witnesses and Mel. He resisted the urge to fidget as he waited to sign the matrimony certificate, which seemed to take forever. After Aragon and Selena signed, King Devon, Aragon's third cousin and best friend, signed before passing the pen to Madeleine, the new Lady Frederic Cassell. Aragon's youngest brother, who went by the Childes's family surname Hawke since he despised his given name, signed next, followed by Lady Cecilia Cassell. Then Edouard swiftly signed and thrust the pen at Miss Blakeley, who signed as well before handing everything to Mel. While Mel signed as the officiating priest, Edouard exhaled to settle his unusual impatience. Surely Miss Hawke wouldn't vanish before he arrived at the reception.

Intent on meeting her, Edouard said little on the carriage ride to Childes House after congratulating Aragon and Selena, and as soon as he arrived, he drifted toward Miss Hawke without finding his twin Elise like he normally would. He should wait to feign disinterest and prevent gossip, but somehow he couldn't be his typical prudent self today. He *had* to talk to Miss Hawke at once.

Flanked by her brothers and sipping sparkling wine, Miss Hawke quieted when he halted beside them, her eyes widening. Their father was nowhere to be seen. For a moment, he and Miss Hawke simply stared at each other. She appeared just as enthralled by him as he was by her.

When her brothers began to frown, Edouard shook himself and forced a polite smile. "Dane, Xavier, could you perform the official introductions?"

Dane nodded and waved toward him. "This is Lord Edouard

Gernand, son of the Count of Blaine." Dane waved toward Miss Hawke. "Our sister, Miss Philippa Hawke."

Still staring up at him, Miss Hawke beamed. "But everyone calls me Pippa."

Xavier sighed. "You aren't supposed to tell gentlemen that, you know."

Leaning toward Pippa, Edouard swallowed and gripped his sparkling wine to avoid capturing her hand and pressing a kiss against her palm. Such an impulse wasn't at all appropriate. "A pleasure, Miss Hawke. Did you enjoy the wedding ceremony?"

Pippa exhaled, her lips curving in a dreamy smile. "'Twas so romantic. Aragon and Selena clearly adore each other. I'm glad Father decided we couldn't miss attending the future duke's wedding ceremony even though he hates visiting Ormas."

Edouard eyed Pippa's lips. What would kissing them be like? He sipped his sparkling wine to distract himself. He shouldn't be thinking about kissing a girl who wasn't even out yet. "Does Sir Julian prefer life in the country?"

As her brothers snorted, Pippa grinned and replied, "Not exactly. He hates leaving behind his magical experiments."

Edouard's brows rose. He'd not realized his cousins' cousins were witches. People who could sense and wield magic, witches made up less than a quarter of all humans, although more were witches in Magehaven and Wildewall, the two duchies closest to the Walle that separated Calatini and other human kingdoms from the kingdoms of magical creatures. He himself didn't possess the slightest magical powers, even though he used small spells and charms purchased from those who did. "How interesting. What's it like being witches?"

Pippa giggled into her sparkling wine. "Oh, we're not witches. Even Father is barely one."

Her brothers traded a wry glance, then Xavier drawled, "Father still can't understand how he married into one of the few magicless families in Magehaven."

Dane added, "Yes, he'd hoped at least one of his children

would make an adequate assistant for his magical experiments. But none of us inherited any magical powers."

Edouard blinked. Dane and Xavier made it sound as if Sir Julian cared more for his magical experiments than his children. Perhaps 'twas why the baronet wasn't here watching over his unfledged daughter like he should.

Pippa frowned at her brothers. "Father eloped with Mother when they were seventeen because they were madly in love, not because she was from Magehaven." She turned to Edouard with a glowing smile. "Tell me what enjoying the season in Ormas is like. I can't wait until my first season next spring once I turn eighteen, although Father is already grumbling and attempting to persuade me to wait another two years until I'm twenty since I'll no longer be underage."

Dazzled by Pippa's smile, Edouard swallowed. So she was five and a half years younger than him—much too young. "Busy with balls and other court events. Although I much prefer family events like this one, visiting art galleries, or quiet evenings at home."

Pippa hummed. "That all sounds lovely. I've never attended a ball, but they sound so romantic. Do you enjoy dancing?"

Edouard studied the bubbles in his sparkling wine. With Pippa's cheerful vivacity, he'd definitely enjoy dancing with her. Not that he should, given how young she was. "Yes. 'Tis excellent exercise and allows stimulating conversation."

Pippa beamed and leaned toward him. "I agree, although I've only ever danced with my brothers and my dancing instructor. I hope *we* can enjoy a dance together at my presentation ball next spring."

Edouard inhaled, burning to request her first dance. But to ask almost a year in advance was mad, and he couldn't restrict her choice so. She was too young to court anyone, and she might prefer another gentleman by then.

Both Dane and Xavier frowning, Dane muttered, "Pippa,

you're not supposed to talk to gentlemen like that, even if they are almost family."

A blush darkening her cheeks, Pippa lowered her gaze. Then she glanced at Edouard through her lashes. "I never have before, but... 'tis different with you somehow."

Edouard couldn't help smiling at Pippa. She was adorably candid and sweet. Perhaps if she was still interested after her come out next year, he could risk courting her, although he must take care not to rush her. "Yes, it *is* different with you."

Inhaling, Pippa fully met his gaze and flashed a radiant grin even brighter than the one she'd worn during the wedding ceremony. 'Twas like a clear sunrise after a fortnight of rain.

Breathless, Edouard stared at Pippa again. Goddess, resisting their attraction would be arduous. But he must for her sake.

Pippa leaned toward him. "Do you reside in Ormas all year?"

Her brothers' narrow-eyed scrutiny heavy on him, Edouard managed to smile and shake his head as he replied, "Just the season. I spend the rest of the year in Landcastle tending the Blaine estate. Father had me assume his duties as count two years ago when I attained my majority."

Pippa twirled her flute of sparkling wine before her lips. "How unusual."

Edouard shrugged. "Not entirely. The Duke of Childes did the same when Aragon turned twenty-five last year." Perhaps inspired by Father's example. "'Tis prudent for heirs to learn their duties while their parents are still around to provide advice."

Her eyes flickering, Pippa sighed. "True." She tilted her head. "Do you prefer residing on your estate or in Ormas?"

Studying the rich gleam of Pippa's hair, Edouard finished his sparkling wine to give himself time to consider her question. "I enjoy both. At the Blaine estate, I'm kept occupied with my duties, yet the pace of life is slower, and I can spend more time at home. In Ormas, my twin Elise and I can see each other often. She always attends the season since her husband Lord Farson is

one of the king's councilors, but they return to Golddell afterward."

Pippa sighed again and touched his arm. "You must miss your twin terribly being apart so much."

Warmed by Pippa's sympathy yet stiffening at her brothers' frowns, Edouard briefly squeezed her hand on his arm. "Yes, but we've our communication mirrors when we're apart, so 'tisn't too bad."

Father strode over with Kit, Father's sultry second wife who'd beguiled Father into marriage five years ago despite being months younger than him and Elise. Their gazes on Pippa's hand on his arm, Kit smirked while Father smiled and said, "Although Edouard and Elise use their communication mirrors so frequently that the spells enchanting them must be renewed twice a year rather than once like usual."

His neck hot, Edouard shifted back until he and Pippa no longer touched. His familiarity with a young lady he'd just met who wasn't even out yet would concern his always careful father.

After Dane and Xavier performed the introductions, Father grinned at Pippa and asked, "How do you like your first visit to Ormas?" When she blinked at him, he chuckled and added, "Caro—the Duchess of Childes—mentioned it when we saw you and my son talking together."

Edouard sighed. Of course Father's cousin had. Not only did the duchess know everything about everyone, Hawke often accused his mother of meddling, although Aragon and Mel were more tactful and simply said she liked managing others.

Pippa returned Father's grin. "I've liked visiting Ormas so far, although we only arrived the day before yesterday, and we're leaving in two days."

Her gorgeous face nonplussed, Kit stared at Pippa. "You're not staying to enjoy the season?"

Edouard nearly snorted. Not surprising that his fashionable and frivolous stepmother was astonished. She was forever

attending social events to enhance her influence at court, so she couldn't fathom not attending the season.

Pippa shrugged and shook her head. "Father insists I must wait until next year."

Still smiling, Father nodded. "Most sensible, although 'tis unfortunate you're not staying longer. We could have had you and your family join us for dinner."

Edouard almost gaped at Father. He must like Pippa a great deal to offer that. Father disliked entertaining and insisted Kit hold the court events she hosted away from Blaine House. The few people Father invited were either close family or art enthusiasts who wanted to view his renowned art collection, and he'd not asked Pippa about art.

Pippa blew a sigh. "We'd enjoy joining you for dinner." Then she smiled. "But perhaps another time."

Smiling back, Father allowed Kit to draw him away to speak with King Devon, who was laughing with the newlyweds nearby.

Alone with Pippa and her brothers again, Edouard swallowed and shifted his weight. He should circulate too, but somehow he couldn't. He arched his brows at Pippa. "So what of Ormas's diversions shall you enjoy during your too brief visit?"

Pippa bounced like a cheery sun nymph at dawn. "Dane and Xavier showed me all of Ormas yesterday, including the palace—so many exquisite buildings. And tomorrow we're going riding then attending a sirenic play, which I've heard are spectacular."

Disregarding her brothers' near frowns, Edouard leaned toward Pippa. If only he could join them tomorrow, but 'twould be too much like courting. "Quite a whirlwind. Which diversion shall you enjoy most?"

Pippa hummed as she finished her sparkling wine. "I'm not certain. Riding is always delightful, and I've never seen a sirenic play before. But I *adore* seeing different types of architecture. The

aesthetics are often lovely and reveal a lot about the time the buildings were created. 'Tis fascinating."

He grinned, his chest warming. "I feel the same about art. But architecture is really just the art of buildings." When Pippa beamed back, he blurted, "Father has a fine art collection of masters from the previous century. Perhaps you'd care to see it when you visit us for dinner next season."

Beaming brighter, Pippa bounced again and began to reply until Elise drawled from behind him, "You're inviting *another* lady to see the art collection? How interesting."

Edouard tensed and nearly flushed. When he'd discovered Selena was a fellow art enthusiast last year, he'd invited her to see Father's collection hoping to court her, although he'd withdrawn as soon as he'd realized Aragon loved her. But his mild interest in Selena had been nothing compared to his overwhelming attraction to Pippa, as his impetuous and premature invitation had proved. And his twin who knew him better than anyone could surely tell that. Please let Elise not reveal her insight to Pippa—'twas much too soon.



## CHAPTER 2



Pippa stiffened at the warm feminine voice teasing Edouard. The lady was definitely intimate with him. Was she the *other* lady he'd invited to see his father's art collection? Her chest tight, Pippa turned to face the lady behind Edouard and relaxed. From the lady's pale coloring that matched his, she could only be his twin. Thank the Goddess.

On the arm of a bearded gentleman who was doubtless her husband, Lady Farson grinned at Pippa and said, "Since you're new to Ormas, I must tell you that invitations to visit Father's art collection are rare and coveted by every art enthusiast at court. And Edouard respects Father's preference for privacy too much to often invite anyone himself."

Pippa gripped her flute, now regrettably empty of sparkling wine to soothe her constricted throat. The other lady Edouard had invited must have been special to him. Was he in love with her? Since he appeared around Dane's age, he must have been in society several years, so a previous attachment was entirely possible. Although she shouldn't, she couldn't help asking, "But what about the other lady you mentioned?"

As both Dane and Xavier frowned at her, Edouard coughed and nodded at the newlyweds, his blond hair glimmering like

fresh sand in the sun. "When I discovered Selena loved art, I asked Father to invite her, and he was happy to invite the art enthusiast his cousin's son was courting."

Exhaling, Pippa smiled at Edouard. So the other lady had been a mere family connection. Good. His obvious attraction to her was genuine then, just as hers for him was. If only she was already out and free to remain in Ormas, so he could court her. She leaned toward Edouard. "I'd love to see your father's art collection sometime. Tenth-century art is so vibrant and vivacious yet still natural and bucolic."

Edouard grinned at her. "That perfect balance of reality and exuberance is why Father and I adore tenth-century art. It reminds people of the joy and wonder found in the world around us."

She nodded, her heart fluttering. Precisely. And no doubt their opinion on tenth-century art wasn't the only one they shared. Too bad she couldn't invite Edouard to join her and her brothers on their ride and to the sirenic play tomorrow to discover what else they had in common. But 'twould be much too brazen, especially since they'd just met.

Instead, she made herself turn to Lady Farson and her husband. "Your brother mentioned you live in Golddell. Have you ever met any nightmara?" The Nightmara Plains, where the magical, horse-like nightmara lived with the human mara clans, dominated the duchy of Golddell.

Lady Farson chuckled. "Of course. As the councilor representing Golddell, Seanian must visit with various nightmara herds whenever we're home. And I always accompany him, along with our ward Arvan, the Duke of Golddell."

While Pippa smiled at those surely extraordinary visits, Dane and Xavier swiftly traded a wide glance, then Dane asked, "Have you ever ridden a nightmara? I've heard riding them is exhilarating."

Lord Farson grinned at her brothers. "No, nightmara rarely carry anyone other than a mara. Besides, I'm usually speaking

with the dominant mares who lead the herds, and they often don't allow *anyone* to ride them."

Pippa hummed. Not surprising. A dominant mare carrying anyone would be like a duke cooking and serving dinner.

Lady Farson chuckled again. "Although we've never ridden any, visiting the nightmara is still fascinating. Arvan especially adores visiting them, much more than he enjoys attending wedding receptions. He's a fourteen-year-old boy, after all." She smiled at Dane and Xavier. "You two are the gentlemen closest to his age. Could you join him for a while? He's lurking near the refreshments table."

Dane and Xavier nodded, then Xavier chuckled and replied, "We could do with more refreshments, anyway."

When her brothers beckoned her, Pippa smiled and shook her head. She couldn't separate from Edouard so soon. "You should go without me. The young duke shan't appreciate a girl intruding."

Dane and Xavier almost frowned at Edouard before returning their gazes to her. But they could doubtless tell from her brilliant smile that she'd no intention of leaving Edouard because they sighed and strode across the drawing room without another word.

Her eyes gleaming, Lady Farson smiled. "Thanks for considering Arvan's feelings, Miss Hawke."

Not daring to glance at Edouard, Pippa nodded as a blush warmed her cheeks. "'Twas nothing. And call me Pippa, please. We're practically family." And hopefully more than practically one day.

Lady Farson grinned while her husband's lips twitched. "As long as you call me Elise." Once Pippa repeated her nod, Elise tugged on Lord Farson's arm. "We should go talk with Mel before he returns to the Great Temple."

Pippa blushed harder when Elise winked before leaving her alone with Edouard. His twin evidently approved of their mutual attraction. She let herself face Edouard again, and her

pulse surged. She'd never been alone with an eligible gentleman before; not that she'd ever wanted to. But with Edouard, she wanted that and more. 'Twas almost painful not to reach out and touch him.

She licked her lips, warming as Edouard's gaze fixed there. What was it about him that drew her like a sailor to a singing siren? Although he was handsome with pale coloring unlike the gentlemen in her family, that hadn't been what had drawn her interest in the Great Temple. No, it had been his palpable air of calm certainty and thoughtful steadiness.

She exhaled. And speaking with Edouard had only deepened her fascination. He was clearly a gentleman a lady could always rely upon, and he'd never forget those he loved. Plus, whenever a smile lit his serious face, her heart quickened, and she burned to keep him bright with joy. He needed that. She licked her lips again.

His pale-blue eyes darkening, Edouard swallowed and rasped, "Shall we circulate rather than staring at each other?"

Tingling flooded Pippa at the hunger resonating in Edouard's deep voice. "I enjoy staring at you."

Edouard shuddered. "Me too, but 'tisn't appropriate. You're not even out yet."

She lifted her chin. She was more mature than her age would suggest. Unlike most young ladies, she'd been managing a household for years because Mother had died giving birth to her. Father was too engrossed with his magical experiments, and her brothers managed the estate instead. She leaned toward Edouard. "I'm not a child."

Edouard stepped back. "But you are young—five and a half years too young."

Before she could retort that most ladies were years younger than their husbands, Father shuffled over and mumbled, "There you are, Pippa. Xavier fetched me from the duke's excellent library to stand with you. Not sure why when 'tis a family event."

Pippa blinked. How had Xavier managed to pry Father from his studies? Doing that was always difficult, so her brothers normally didn't bother. Then she blushed. Xavier had no doubt bothered because he and Dane were concerned by the obvious attraction between her and Edouard.

Edouard nodded at Father. "Perhaps your younger son fetched you because not everyone is your family. I'm a maternal cousin to the groom."

Father tilted his head. "You do have the look of the duchess about you." He frowned. "If you're not related, why are you alone with my daughter?"

Still blushing, she interjected before Edouard could reply, "We're in the middle of the drawing room, hardly alone."

Father humphed. "Still engaged in a private conversation with an unrelated gentleman. You're much too young for that." He grasped her arm. "Let's head to the library."

Pippa stiffened, her chest squeezing at leaving Edouard. "But—"

Father continued, "I want to finish my book. The duke's library is the only good thing about visiting Ormas."

Edouard nodded with a polite smile, nothing like the heart-warming ones he'd given her earlier. "I must circulate before I leave. 'Twas a pleasure to meet you, Miss Hawke. Until next spring."

She stared after Edouard as he joined Aragon and Selena. He was definitely determined to wait because he thought her too young. But at least he was planning to approach her next year. She allowed Father to pull her to the library then selected a novel to amuse herself rather than brood about Edouard.

She was several chapters in when Dane and Xavier strode into the library. Dane said, "The other guests have left. Shall we take a turn about the garden?"

Sighing, Pippa marked her place and stood. Her brothers must want to talk about Edouard without Father overhearing. Not that he would, since he was absorbed in the magical tome he

was reading. Yet walking outside would be enjoyable, even with the upcoming lecture from Dane and Xavier.

In the sunny garden, her brothers flanked her as they began strolling beside the trellises of climbing roses. Ignoring them, she smiled at Childes House's ornate turrets, chimneys, and battlements of white brick as well as its numerous windows. The ducal townhouse was a beautiful eighth-century mansion, one of the finest in Ormas, and she was fortunate enough to be staying in it during their visit. She'd spent happy hours studying the townhouse from various perspectives since she'd arrived.

After a moment, Dane coughed then asked, "*What* were you doing with Edouard, Pippa?"

Xavier smoothed his mustache. "You kept staring at him and acted almost brazen. Not your usual behavior."

She dragged her gaze from Childes House and bent to sniff a rose to disguise her blush. "I know, but I couldn't help myself."

Dane exhaled. "You can't treat gentlemen like that. You'll gain a reputation as a flirt who's no better than she should be."

Pippa glared at her oldest brother. Must he be so insulting? "I don't intend to treat *gentlemen* like that. Edouard is different."

Xavier gripped her elbow, halting her. "*Edouard*? You can't call a gentleman you just met by his first name."

Blushing again, she pulled her elbow free. True, but somehow she couldn't think of Edouard by his title. "I don't feel as if we just met." When her brothers frowned, she added, "And he felt the same too. I doubt he's ever treated a lady like he did me."

Dane and Xavier exchanged a narrow glance, then Dane rumbled, "No, Edouard is much too serious and deliberate to flirt."

Xavier snorted. "He's certainly not the gentleman we worried about flirting with you—Hawke was. We're merely distant cousins, and he's a rakehell."

Pippa blinked and tilted her head. "Really? But Hawke is

plainly in love with Wren." And Hawke's shy best friend appeared equally in love with him, so why was he a rakehell?

Dane grimaced then shrugged. "Yes, but Hawke hasn't realized that yet. I'm simply relieved he considers you family and hasn't flirted."

She swallowed. "Me too." The only gentleman she wanted flirting with her was Edouard. She turned and faced her brothers with a brilliant smile. "As for Edouard, don't fret about him. He's determined to wait until my come out to approach me again, and he's not the type to take advantage when courting a lady."

Xavier's mouth quirked. "We were more concerned about you taking advantage of *him*."

Pippa raised her eyes skyward. "As if I could. Or would." She arched her brows at her brothers. "And I swear not to call E—*Lord* Edouard Gernand by his first name aloud again—at least until we've been courting for three months."

Dane and Xavier sighed but nodded. Then Dane said, "I suppose 'tis enough. Shall we finish touring the garden?"

She and her brothers spent another hour in the fragrant garden before returning inside for dinner. The following day, none of them mentioned Edouard as they enjoyed their ride and the sirenic play, but her mind kept returning to him. How often would he have smiled if he'd joined them?

When she and Father began the journey back to Hawke Manor the following morning, she sighed as they traveled past Blaine House, mentally bidding Edouard farewell. And once home, she continued thinking about him, especially when she received letters from the Duchess of Childes, which now contained news about him in addition to the rest of the family.

Two months after leaving Ormas, Pippa gasped at the duchess's latest letter, her chest aching. Edouard's father had unexpectedly died. He, Elise, and Lady Blaine must be devastated. Particularly Edouard since he and his father had clearly been close and very much alike.

She leapt upright then grasped a pen and some paper.

Although 'twasn't appropriate for a young lady to write an unrelated gentleman, she must write Edouard to express her condolences and cheer him however she could. As soon as she'd finished, she sent her heartfelt letter to Ormas. Please let it help. Perhaps it might even make him smile briefly even though she'd not be there to see it.