

CHAPTER 1



Shortly before *Sea Vision* was due to dock, Oakmoor leapt from his carriage to await the Orandian ship's early morning arrival. As the Minister of Foreign Relations for Calatini, 'twas his duty to greet their first Orandian ambassador in a decade as soon as she arrived then escort her to the luxurious townhouse near the palace he'd secured for her and her delegation as their embassy. Hopefully, Lady Siobhan Driscoll was as clever and composed as she'd appeared in the letters and mirror calls they'd exchanged over the past two months. With everything else complicating his life at the moment, he didn't need a troublesome new ambassador adding to that.

He shoved aside his personal worries when the happily married Countess of Escana, who'd been assisting him at the Ministry of Foreign Relations for three years, joined him on the docks. She smiled at him with no hint of flirtation and briskly said, "I visited the Orandian's new embassy on my way here. The final repairs and decorating were finished yesterday, and the servants are preparing a breakfast feast to welcome the Orandians."

He nodded. Exactly like he'd specified. "Wonderful. Thanks for checking everything was ready."

Lady Escana calmly returned his nod. "Of course, your grace. What else are mere assistants for?"

Oakmoor couldn't help a chuckle. Lady Escana wasn't a mere anything, let alone a mere assistant. She was perceptive and engaging as well as diligent and poised, so she could assume his duties if he ever wanted to retire one day. Agreeing to allow her to become his assistant had been an excellent decision, although he'd initially been concerned her interest in assisting him had been a ploy to begin an affair, and he never trifled with committed ladies like wives or betrotheds despite his rakehell reputation. Thankfully, Lady Escana was devoted to her husband and had always treated him like an older brother. A refreshing change from most ladies at court, who adored his suave, rakish air and lusted after his title, wealth, and influence. Only one lady had truly disdained him for all that—the maddening royal witch who still pervaded his carnal dreams since their disturbingly intense night together nearly fourteen years ago. He dreamt of Juliet much too often, although his recent curse dreams had begun to eclipse the ones featuring her.

He was drawn back to the present when Lady Escana asked as *Sea Vision* started to dock, "Is Lady Driscoll a witch, do you think? I've heard that at least half of the people on the isle of Orandia are witches, like in Magehaven."

While the Orandian ship was secured, he shrugged. "She hasn't said, and prior Orandian ambassadors haven't been, but 'tis possible, and she might even be a Rhiannon descendant." Rhiannon, the founder of human magic, had eventually settled in Orandia, which was why so many in the island kingdom were witches or Rhiannon descendants, the most powerful of all witches who were descended from the early witches whose magical powers had been enhanced by Rhiannon through a blood-kith ceremony. The duchy of Magehaven only had as many witches as Orandia because it contained two of the three eminent witch academies in Calatini and was just south of the

Walle, the powerful magical wall that separated human kingdoms from the kingdoms of magical creatures.

Oakmoor frowned at Lady Escana. "But don't ask Lady Driscoll about her magical powers unless she mentions them first." Many witches, particularly Rhiannon descendants, didn't discuss their magical powers with ordinary humans to prevent jealousy and exploitation. 'Twas partly why he'd told no one when his erratic magic had inexplicably appeared on his forty-fifth natalday almost two years ago—thirty years late because most witches' magical powers finished developing when their bodies matured.

Lady Escana sniffed. "I know better than to be so rude as to pry about Lady Driscoll's magic."

Before the countess could grumble further, Lady Driscoll and an unknown gentleman strode down the gangplank. A mature couple around his age, they both wore the typical Orandian attire of tunics with long overcoats, although Lady Driscoll wore a long tunic, while her escort wore a knee-length one with boots. And both had reddish hair like many Orandians did, except hers was bright red and her escort's red-brown with flecks of gray.

When the Orandian ambassador and her escort reached them, Oakmoor swept a smooth bow while flashing a charming grin. He offered the archaic greeting common in Orandia, "Good morrow, Lady Driscoll and..."

Lady Driscoll grinned. In a lilting Orandian accent, she said, "Good morning, your grace." She squeezed the gentleman's arm still firmly entwined with hers. "This is Sir Lorcan Driscoll, my husband."

Oakmoor blinked. The Orandian ambassador had never mentioned having a husband while arranging her visit. Yet her being married, happily from the warmth between them, would eliminate romantic intrigue that he couldn't deal with right now. He smiled at Lady Driscoll's husband. "A pleasure, Sir Lorcan." He nodded at Lady Escana. "And this is the Countess of Escana,

my assistant at the Ministry of Foreign Relations." Once everyone exchanged greetings, he gestured toward his carriage. "Shall we head to the embassy? Lady Escana shall handle transportation for the rest of your delegation."

After he'd settled in the backward seat across from Lady Driscoll and Sir Lorcan, Oakmoor asked them, "How was your voyage from Orandia?"

While the carriage rumbled forward, Lady Driscoll smiled and replied, "The three weeks were smooth, although I had to ensure Lorcan's nausea-healing charm was always fully charged."

Sir Lorcan shuddered. "Yes, even the calmest seas make me terribly ill. Why I married a sea witch, I don't know."

Oakmoor scrutinized the Orandian couple. No witch in Calatini so openly mentioned their magical powers. Perhaps they were more frank because many more people were witches in Orandia.

Lady Driscoll slanted her husband a laughing glance. "Maybe 'twas because my seven brothers threatened to kill you if you didn't."

Although there was an interesting story there, Oakmoor didn't ask them about it because he hated anyone prying into his own private matters, especially when they'd just met, so he tried to offer others the courtesy of not prying. Instead, he told Lady Driscoll and her husband about the plans to welcome them to Calatini.

Once he and Lady Escana ate the breakfast feast with Lady Driscoll and her delegation, he and his assistant left the Orandians to settle into their new embassy. He returned to Oakmoor House to check on the preparations for his soiree tomorrow to celebrate the Orandian ambassador's arrival. Everything was nearly ready, and he handled the last few matters requiring his attention before rejoining Lady Driscoll and Sir Lorcan to tour Ormas.

Following their tour, he hosted a sumptuous dinner for the Orandian couple at Oakmoor House, where they told him all about their family. He chuckled at their amusing stories about their four grown children back in Orandia, although his chest tightened somewhat too. If he'd married in his twenties like they had, he'd also have grown children. But love and commitment weren't for him, and having to remain faithful to one lady for the rest of his life had always made him shudder, so he never had. And now he never might. Given the curse dreams he'd begun suffering over six months ago, his obsessive first lover Elvaira's vindictive beast curse was surely close to manifesting, and that curse would destroy any chance of happiness or a normal life.

After dinner, Oakmoor showed Lady Driscoll and Sir Lorcan his ballroom's renowned stained-glass ceiling created by his duchy's fantastic artisans and made unbreakable by magic. Both were fascinated and asked to perform probing spells to study the stained-glass ceiling's magic, and he agreed so long as their spells didn't touch it. Glass shattering on them would be unpleasant, and repairing the ceiling would be near impossible.

The next morning following an early breakfast, he met with Lady Escana to discuss the Orandians' arrival before heading to the embassy to escort Lady Driscoll and Sir Lorcan to the palace to meet King Devon and Queen Kiera. Like most, the Orandians exclaimed at the sprawling white castle that had been home to Calatini's kings since the kingdom's founding. And rightly so —'twas a stunning and exquisite palace that possessed no equal.

Once Oakmoor ushered the Orandians into the vast throne room and introduced them, King Devon, who was crownless like usual, smiled at them from the left-hand throne. "Welcome to Calatini, Lady Driscoll, Sir Lorcan. I'm glad we can reestablish relations between our kingdoms after so many years."

Also crownless and seated on the other throne on the dais, Queen Kiera beamed at the Orandians. "I hope you don't mind we met you here rather than in more intimate surroundings, but

Calatini's first Orandian ambassador in a decade was too momentous not to."

Lady Driscoll grinned. "Of course." She waved toward the white velvet curtain wafting behind the two thrones despite there being no breeze. "And meeting in the throne room allows us the opportunity to see the legendary Mirror of Wisdom."

Oakmoor stiffened and eyed Lady Driscoll and her husband askance. To boldly mention the powerful and perilous enchanted mirror must mean they were interested in using it. Yet although the Mirror of Wisdom could show the watcher the answer to any question, using it could be deadly. Years ago, the Mirror of Wisdom had killed King Devon's mother and induced the king's premature birth, making the entire kingdom fear the Vireni line would end. Oakmoor swallowed. Even he had never been tempted to risk using the Mirror of Wisdom to discover how to break the nearly thirty-year-old curse that would soon turn him into a hideous beast.

Sir Lorcan nodded and leaned forward. "We've heard the Mirror of Wisdom was bathed in water from our seer's divination pool. Such a wondrous tool to help your reign. We'd greatly love to see it."

King Devon and Queen Kiera traded a lengthy glance. Then King Devon murmured, "We can show you as long as you swear not to use it."

Lady Driscoll smiled and inclined her head. "Of course. Enchanted tools frequently lose their effectiveness if used too often."

At that nonchalant reply, King Devon and Queen Kiera exchanged another glance, and Oakmoor almost shook his head. The Orandians evidently didn't consider the mirror perilous, probably because they were accustomed to using enchanted items on their magical isle. A mistake. But not satisfying their curiosity could hamper relations between Calatini and Orandia, and Lady Driscoll *had* sworn they'd not use the mirror.

After a moment, King Devon returned Lady Driscoll's nod then gestured for a royal guard to draw aside the curtain.

Oakmoor exhaled. Despite having been at court for nearly three decades, he'd never seen the Mirror of Wisdom because King Sarastor had covered it and forbade its use after it had killed Queen Mynee. When the mirror was revealed, his neck prickled at the power emanating from the massive mirror with a mahogany frame of crescent moon faces and flowing vines. The mirror and its frame gleamed with a peculiar opalescent sheen which betrayed its magical nature too. Definitely eerie and powerful. Even ordinary humans without the least magic could sense that.

While he suppressed a shudder, Lady Driscoll hummed, her eyes bright. She chirped, "You can cover the Mirror of Wisdom again now."

His gaze gleaming too, Sir Lorcan tugged on his long overcoat while a royal guard covered the mirror and said to King Devon, "Your mother commissioned *quite* the faegift for your father, your majesty. You must use it often."

King Devon's mouth tightened as Queen Kiera shivered, and he grasped her hand. Both were doubtless remembering the mirror's deadly legacy.

To distract them, Oakmoor drawled, "Queen Mynee was in love, and people in love are mad I've found." He winked at the royal couple. "Some even obsessively hunt for a mysterious mermaid they knew all of one night then marry her, for instance. Makes me glad I've never suffered such madness. I enjoy my freedom too much."

At the description of their courtship, King Devon smiled, and Queen Kiera chuckled then replied, "'Tis apparent from your rakehell ways, your grace." Queen Kiera turned back to the Orandian ambassador and Sir Lorcan. "We'll let you begin your tour of the palace so that you'll have time to rest before the Duke of Oakmoor's soiree tonight. I remember how draining court introductions can be."

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THAT EVENING, Oakmoor, Lady Driscoll, and Sir Lorcan greeted his many guests while Lady Escana ensured his soiree ran smoothly. His drawing room was extremely crowded tonight. *All* of court was in Ormas this year because the social season had started three weeks ago on Plantfete with King Devon and Queen Kiera's wedding ceremony and her coronation. Plus, everyone wanted to gawk at Calatini's new Orandian ambassador.

Not long after they'd greeted King Devon and Queen Kiera, Juliet glided into the drawing room wearing a modish ballgown of deep-amethyst satin. Tingling heat flooded him like it always did when the royal witch was near. Goddess, why must Juliet's exotic beauty and powerful air bewitch him so? Despite all his experience with women, he became as desperate as a lusty satyr who'd not fornicated in years whenever she was around. After their long ago night together when their mutual hunger had taken her unexpected innocence, he'd ensured they were never alone and kept their public interactions brief and restricted to council affairs. On the one occasion he hadn't, in Childes House's garden seven and a half months ago, their explosive passion had consumed them, and they'd nearly ravished each other against an alcove wall before she'd slapped him and vanished with a jump travel spell. And since that passionate encounter, he'd been unable to settle on another lover. Juliet had cursed him as surely as Elvaira had, damn her.

Yet when Juliet paused to greet them, he gritted a smooth smile. No one must guess his primal hunger for her, especially not the lady herself. He said, "Lady Driscoll, Sir Lorcan, allow me to introduce Lady Juliet, the royal witch. Lady Juliet, this is our new Orandian ambassador and her husband."

Like always, Juliet returned his smile with a cool one that didn't touch her gorgeous dark-brown eyes. Then she turned

toward the Orandians, her smile warming and becoming genuine. "A pleasure, Lady Driscoll, Sir Lorcan."

Lady Driscoll grinned back. "Likewise, Lady Juliet. We've been eager to meet the most illustrious witch in Calatini. Your reputation for intricate and innovative spellwork is impressive, and we'd love to swap spells sometime. I'm a sea witch, while my husband is a lore witch."

Juliet's dark brows quirked. Clearly she was as surprised by the Orandians' openness about their magical powers as he'd been and couldn't imagine revealing her own so quickly. Like him, she'd always been discreet. Juliet was his only lover who'd not told anyone about their night together, so it had thankfully remained secret because he never overtly seduced his lovers in public or discussed them afterward. Juliet also rarely mentioned her past, and all she revealed was that she'd traveled with gypsies before settling in Calatini. Yet she'd obviously been born a lady from her perfect manners and ease at court, albeit not from Calatini given her luscious olive skin and intense dark-brown hair and eyes.

As more guests approached, Juliet said to Lady Driscoll, "I'd enjoy swapping spells too. Good evening." Then without acknowledging him, she swept into the crowd. The maddening witch was never so disdainful in her letters.

Aching to chase after Juliet to transform her cool disdain to fervid desire with fierce kisses, he made himself unclench his jaw and grin as he turned to his next guests, Lord and Lady Ravenstone, who'd shocked court three months ago by convincing their parents to accept their marriage, thus ending the centuries-long Greysnowe-Ravenstone feud. And from the frequent heated glances between the couple, Lord Ravenstone had truly thawed the beauteous "Lady Snow", which was almost as shocking as their families' feud ending. Not that Oakmoor resented the count's success, despite having briefly attempted to court the lady himself over six months ago.

He swallowed a sigh while greeting the next couple, Sir Ellis and Lady Campbell. He'd only attempted to court Lady Ravenstone because, once his curse dreams began, he'd known he wouldn't remain human much longer, and the responsible cousin who should have inherited his duchy had recently died in a tragic fire. His responsible cousin's younger brother would ruin the duchy in under a decade with his spendthrift ways, drunken stupors, and countless greedy women. To prevent that degenerate cousin from inheriting, he needed to sire an heir while he still could, even though he'd never desired marriage. An ice-perfect lady like the former "Lady Snow" had seemed ideal since she'd not miss him after his beast curse manifested. Yet when her parents had dissuaded his courtship, he'd moved on without regret to the fashionable Countess of Blaine. He'd been about to propose to the sultry yet strong countess when she'd mysteriously disappeared on Longnight. In the four months since, he'd begun courting various eligible ladies, but none held his interest for longer than three weeks. They were all so *young* and bland, and he couldn't even summon the desire to kiss them thanks to Juliet.

He tensed when he greeted the elderly Duke of Osbourne, a fellow councilor, along with the duke's youngest daughter, Lady Georgiana Laurent—the eligible lady he'd been courting for the last three weeks. Despite her youth, she'd seemed a suitable choice at first since she was steely behind her sweet smiles and understood his duties thanks to growing up with her father. Plus, with her dark hair and brown eyes, Lady Georgiana was his type except for her pale skin. Yet her coy giggles and feigned fragility had begun to grate. He couldn't possibly marry her and suffer those for the brief time he'd left as human. No, he must end their courtship, although not during his soiree for the Orandian ambassador.

After everyone finally finished arriving, Oakmoor left the Orandians engrossed in conversation with the royal couple and the Ravenstones before circulating and entertaining his guests with stories about Orandia as well as Lady Driscoll and her

husband. Then he frowned mid-sentence when an ancient woman in a servant's dress climbed atop a chair near the wall by the garden. *Who* was that? She clearly didn't possess an invitation to an exclusive court event. Was she here to gawk at or assault the Orandian ambassador for some reason? He'd better handle her at once. Excusing himself, he began striding through the crowd toward the interloper.