

PROLOGUE



At the influential Duchess of Childes's well-attended ladies' luncheon, Elise almost grinned as she studied Lady Kiera at the heart of the crowd. Their future queen was even more popular than usual because today's luncheon was to celebrate the royal wedding and Lady Kiera's coronation on Plantfete next week.

Elise suddenly tensed when her husband Seanian's maternal great-aunt Lady Gilbert emerged from the crowd and began marching toward her. Not again.

She gritted a bright smile as the overbearing elderly lady approached. She'd managed to avoid Lady Gilbert, who was one of the greatest gossips at court in addition to being Seanian's great-aunt, ever since the ladies' luncheon she herself had hosted three months ago. Then, Lady Gilbert had scolded her about not having borne Seanian's children despite being married nearly three years—a failure she already felt too keenly without his great-aunt tormenting her about it. She'd only escaped that afternoon thanks to Father's young widow Kit, but Kit had disappeared on Longnight and couldn't rescue her now.

Rude and intrusive as ever, Lady Gilbert raked Elise with a

narrow glance then thumped her cane and snapped, "Still not pregnant, I see."

Pain piercing her chest, Elise clung to her bright smile. If only she was. She *ached* to have Seanian's children and build the large family she'd wanted even before Mother had died from a wasting disease when she and her twin Edouard were thirteen. After a year of marriage without falling pregnant, she'd managed to convince Seanian that they should consult Healer Althea, the best witch healer in Ormas, about their unexplained infertility. Yet nothing the witch healer had attempted had helped because she'd still never quickened once.

Burying her heartache, she lifted her chin and smoothly replied to Lady Gilbert, "No, I'm not pregnant yet."

Thumping her cane once more, Lady Gilbert snorted. "Selfish girl. How dare you delay doing your duty to your husband? Neither of you is in the first flush of youth—you'll be twenty-five soon, and Farson turned *thirty-two* last month."

Elise's lips tightened. Her and Edouard's natalday was half a year away, which hardly counted as soon. And twenty-four and thirty-two weren't anywhere near too old to start building their large family. Ladies often had children for at least another fifteen years, and gentlemen for even longer.

Before Elise could voice a polite protest, Lady Gilbert snapped, "Plus, Farson is a councilor and manages the Golddell duchy for your ward, the young Duke of Golddell. And my nephew is also the sole descendant of one of the oldest baronies in Calatini. He deserves an heir."

Elise stiffened. Seanian didn't deserve an heir. He deserved a *family*. His elderly parents had peacefully passed away when he was eighteen, so his only blood relatives were Lady Gilbert and her browbeaten family, and Seanian wasn't close to them. They'd Arvan—more formally known as the Duke of Golddell—to raise, but raising the nearly sixteen-year-old son of Seanian's sadly departed childhood best friends wasn't the same as having a large family of their own.

She swallowed a soft sigh. A large family with eight or so children—half boisterous boys and half equally lively girls, preferably sets of twins like her and Edouard. She and Seanian both deserved that perfect family. Yet explaining the difference between an heir and a family to a shallow lady like Seanian's great-aunt was futile, and she mustn't be rude to one of his few remaining blood relatives. So she forced another smile and politely murmured, "I'll tell Seanian you said that he deserves a family. Please excuse me."

Then she swept away and joined the Duchess of Childes and the duchess's best friend Lady Keyes. Lady Gilbert wouldn't dare scold her in front of the most influential duchess at court, who'd been Father's dear cousin and was mother to King Devon's closest cousins as well. Especially given the duchess's penchant for lovingly managing and defending her relations. A true matriarch to emulate, which Elise would as soon as she and Seanian had their large family together.

Despite deftly escaping Lady Gilbert, the elderly lady's scold lingered, so Elise had trouble maintaining her usual smiles for the rest of the day. Even during dinner that evening, Arvan devouring an entire roast chicken while spiritedly telling her and Seanian about winning his races against Dane and Xavier Hawke that afternoon failed to evoke more than a faint smile from her.

When they were preparing for bed that night, Seanian slanted her a concerned frown then dismissed her maid Ann and his valet Jebb as soon as the married couple had helped them change. Once they were alone, he said, "Tell me what's wrong, my love. You've been upset since you returned from the Duchess of Childes's ladies' luncheon."

She sighed and set down her brush. Although Seanian had never cared for his pompous great-aunt, she mustn't shatter relations between him and his few blood relatives. So she replied in a purposely light voice, "Not upset, annoyed. Lady Gilbert cornered me at the duchess's luncheon."

Seanian scowled as he pulled her into his arms. "What did that overbearing harpy say to you?"

Tingling warmth flooded her like always at Seanian's embrace and tender concern. She slid her arms about his neck and pressed against him. Making love with her beloved husband was *just* what she needed. She nuzzled his bearded jaw. "Nothing surprising. But I've no wish to discuss Lady Gilbert." Then she captured Seanian's mouth in a deep kiss.

Seanian rumbled and hungrily returned her kiss as they shed their dressing gowns and tumbled into bed, where they came together with their usual ardent passion before falling asleep wrapped in one another's arms without any pesky nightclothes between them. They only bothered with those during her courses.

In the still hours between midnight and dawn, Elise jerked awake with Lady Gilbert's scold echoing through her once more. Nestling closer to the peacefully sleeping Seanian, she exhaled and stared up at the inky ceiling. They *must* unearth a solution to their unexplained infertility.

She frowned. But even Healer Althea couldn't understand why they'd not created a child together—all her magical tests had indicated they were completely healthy. When they'd first begun consulting her, the witch healer had them attempt natural remedies that helped other couples conceive. They'd paused consulting her when Father had died a few months later, although they'd continued her remedies to no avail. So when they'd returned to Ormas a few weeks before the beginning of last season, they'd resumed consulting Healer Althea, and the witch healer had attempted a variety of fertility spells. She'd started with weaker ones because fertility spells could have a high magical cost, especially strong ones. But again to no avail, and on the day before yesterday, they'd been attempting fertility spells for an entire year.

Elise worried her lip in the weighty darkness. 'Twas time for

her and Seanian to attempt more than fertility spells. They must consult the veiled witch.

She swallowed. The mysterious veiled witch was the powerful seer that had provided the shy Wren's glamour spell to seduce cousin Hawke, Lady Kiera's enchanted mermaid costume that allowed her to meet King Devon, and the cryptic prophecy that had helped successfully resolve the recent Magehaven ore crisis. Yet no one knew much about the veiled witch. Not even what she looked like since she always wore black veils that concealed her hair and most of her face. And that for some reason, the veiled witch had chosen to set up her witch shop in a poor neighborhood despite being a Rhiannon descendant, the most powerful of all human witches.

Elise blew a silent sigh. When first learning about the veiled witch at Hawke and Wren's wedding six months ago, she'd wanted to consult her about their unexplained infertility, but Seanian had convinced her to wait. Then, they'd only been attempting fertility spells for half a year, and they knew so little about the veiled witch, other than she wasn't a healer, and only a witch healer could truly heal their infertility. They'd not known the veiled witch was a seer then. A seer couldn't heal them, but one could *see* the solution that would. Yet she'd promised Seanian that she'd give Healer Althea's fertility spells an entire year before seeking additional help. A year that was now over.

She twisted the wedding token on her upper left arm, the gold spiral armlet warm against her skin. Seanian would doubtless attempt to persuade her to wait longer if she mentioned consulting the veiled witch. Her steadfast husband didn't like change, and he was fiercely protective of her. He hadn't even liked using fertility spells from Healer Althea because he worried that they risked her wellbeing, and all of court, including King Devon and Lady Kiera, trusted Healer Althea. She grimaced. Seanian wouldn't want her visiting a poor neighborhood in Ormas and consulting a mysterious seer, and she didn't want to waste time persuading him that she'd be fine. So

she must visit the veiled witch without him knowing then tell him afterward.

That decided, she curled even closer to Seanian and drifted back into slumber, waking to his ardent kiss just after dawn. The most amazing way to awaken. Kissing him back, she purred and caressed all the sleek muscles he'd earned from years of vigorous riding. How she adored making love with her husband. Until they'd become close and fallen in love, she'd never realized how passionate she was. And Seanian had often said likewise about himself. They were truly perfect for one another—the nightmara even called them true mates, aligned minds with the potential for deep and lasting love.

As their bodies cooled and hearts slowed after making love, Elise sighed and possessively splayed her hand on Seanian's lightly furred chest over his heart. A deep and lasting love indeed. And so intensely ardent too. Thank the Goddess they'd found each other.

Seanian nuzzled her and murmured against her skin, "We should get dressed. Where do you want to go riding this morning?"

Her stomach twisting, she withdrew her hand from her husband's chest. "I'm going to remain behind today."

Seanian smiled at her, his earnest brown eyes soft. "It *has* been a few days since you joined Edouard for breakfast." When in Ormas, she ate breakfast with her dear twin once or twice a week to maintain their close bond as well as give Seanian and Arvan time alone.

She nodded as her stomach twisted further at lying to Seanian. But she *had* to consult the veiled witch today.

Seanian chuckled. "How many times do you think Edouard shall mention Pippa?"

Elise smiled despite her knotted stomach. Her twin was completely smitten with their cousins' cousin Pippa Hawke, and had been since they'd met at cousin Aragon and Selena's wedding nearly two years ago. Yet the couple had only formed a

secret understanding last month. Secret because Pippa's father insisted they wait until her nineteenth natalday to become betrothed. Being almost betrothed, Edouard called it. A ridiculous distinction that only Edouard would make.

She slid from bed with a light shrug. "I'm certain Edouard only mentions Pippa every sentence or two. Not that he utters many at this hour. You know how he hates mornings." Her twin refused to talk to anyone until after his first cup of kahve and called her and Seanian's early-morning exuberance disgusting and unnatural. When Edouard joined them on their daily rides, which thankfully wasn't often, they delayed them several hours because she loved her twin, and Seanian loved her, although he chafed at the delay.

When she and Seanian joined their gangly ward downstairs, Arvan grinned at them while devouring a roll stuffed with meat and cheese, another waiting in his other hand. "Morning, Farson, Elise." He eyed her morning dress. "Visiting Edouard, I see." He turned to Seanian. "Where are we riding?"

Seanian rubbed his beard as he accepted a stuffed roll from a kitchen maid. "You choose, but we must return within three hours. I've duties to attend to later this morning."

Arvan grimaced and began his second stuffed roll. "You always do."

Waving aside the stuffed roll the maid offered because she was supposedly eating with Edouard, Elise couldn't help her smile at Arvan's impudent drawl. Such a teenager. Not that he was wrong. Seanian preferred observing a daily routine because he said it kept matters organized and maintained his momentum to accomplish everything. And he did accomplish a lot—he managed the Golddell duchy while training Arvan how to do so in four years; he handled all of Calatini's internal relations like the currently visiting nightmara delegation since he was the councilor leading that ministry; he rode for several hours a day because no one from the horse-mad Golddell duchy couldn't not; he attended any family or court events she asked him to, and he

made love with her as often as possible. And once they started their large family, he'd add raising their many boisterous children to that list.

She kissed Seanian farewell and told Arvan to win a race or two against Seanian for her. Once her beloved gentlemen had left, she accepted her stuffed roll then ordered a carriage and headed across the quiet streets of Ormas to Rhiannon's Veils, the veiled witch's witch shop near Lady Kiera's former orphanage that Hawke and Wren now managed. She'd only a few hours to consult the veiled witch and return to Golddell House before Seanian and Arvan did.

So as soon as the carriage halted, she leapt out and swept through the unprepossessing witch shop's weathered red door into the dim, empty chamber heavy with incense and mystery. Ideal for a mysterious Rhiannon-descendant seer who never revealed her face. Then she stilled when the veiled witch sashayed through the door of glass beads at the back of the witch shop. Definitely as eerie and powerful as everyone said.

The veiled witch quirked a dark brow. "To what do I owe the honor of this near-dawn visit, my lady?"

Elise inhaled and splayed a hand over her flat stomach. "My husband and I have been married nearly three years, but I've yet to conceive despite attempting fertility spells the past year. I require your help to see why, madam witch."

Her black veils fluttering, the veiled witch tilted her head. "'Twould be easier if your husband was here too, although I should be able to manage." Her bracelets and tiny bells jingled as she waved toward the wooden table. "Come sit, my lady."

Inhaling another bracing breath, Elise sat while the veiled witch set a large quartz bowl on the table and added crystalline water from an opalescent leather flask.

Then the veiled witch extracted a needle and reached for her hand. "Your and your husband's full names as well as your hand, please."

Elise swallowed but extended her hand. The veiled witch no

doubt required names and blood for her scrying spell. "Elise Marguerite Gernand Farson, Lady Farson. And my husband is Seanian Roswald Farson, Lord Farson."

The veiled witch's brows quirked over her exotically lined eyes. "Calatini's Minister of Internal Relations and his wife, hmm. Moonbud and her mate hold you both and the young Duke of Golddell you're raising in great esteem. And nightmara are quite particular on the humans they regard outside the mara clans. Especially the nightmara queen-heir."

Elise shrugged and managed a wry smile. "It helps that we're all horse mad, like most humans from Golddell." The nightmara living in Golddell was why so many from that duchy were horse mad. And although the horse-like magical creatures rarely let humans ride them except for the mara who lived among them, nightmara did appreciate humans who loved horses. And thanks to their power over dreams and the mind, nightmara could always tell when that love was genuine and reciprocated.

The veiled witch chuckled. "I imagine it does. As does you and your husband being true mates."

Her smile growing, Elise inclined her head. Yes, nightmara treasured those with that bond. Dominant mares even called their true mates to them to help them be better and stronger rulers. But mentioning that she and Seanian were true mates would have sounded like boasting.

Grasping a silver needle, the veiled witch pricked Elise's finger, allowing three drops of blood to fall into her scrying bowl and turn the crystalline water pink. The dim witch shop hushed as the veiled witch peered into her scrying bowl. Eventually, the veiled witch returned her gaze to Elise, her dark eyes piercing. "The reason Healer Althea's fertility spells have failed is because ordinary healing spells can do nothing to help you and your husband conceive."

Her chest heavy, Elise swallowed. "But Healer Althea said we're completely healthy."

A sigh undulated the veiled witch's black veils. "Which is

why ordinary fertility spells can't help you and Lord Farson. I would recommend you quit attempting them due to their potentially high magical cost. You've two paths. One: you allow matters to run their natural course and conceive when the Goddess wills it. Or two: you go on a quest to hasten matters, although such a quest shall likely cause complications."

Clenching the edge of the wooden table, Elise leaned forward. She couldn't possibly wait even longer to start their perfect family. "Tell me more about this quest."

The veiled witch sighed again. "You must visit the Orandian seer and request her advice about conceiving children. But remember, if you follow her advice, your and your husband's lives shall never be the same."

Elise inhaled to banish the chill skittering across her skin at the seer's cryptic warning. Surely the veiled witch simply meant their lives would change because they'd have a child to raise. The first of many. She lifted her chin. "I understand. How much do I owe for your prophecy?"

Humming, the veiled witch circled her hand over her scrying bowl, and Elise's blood rose from the once more crystalline water. Then the veiled witch flicked her fingers, and the blood vanished. Goddess, what powerful magic. The veiled witch murmured, "Nine gold. And 'twasn't a prophecy, merely advice."

Elise smiled. But advice from a Rhiannon-descendant seer was tantamount to a prophecy. Her chest lightened. So she and Seanian would soon have the large family she'd always wanted. She gave the veiled witch the requested gold coins. "Thank you, madam witch."

Then she hurried back to Golddell House. Unable to settle while she waited for Seanian and Arvan to finish their ride, she bounced about her and Seanian's modest chambers that had only one bedchamber, unlike most shared by affluent couples. If only she could go on a ride herself to expend some of her excitement. But she must tell Seanian her news as soon as he returned. Please let him not be too upset about her lie earlier to obtain it.

When Seanian strode into their chambers an hour later to change, he halted and blinked at her. "You look excited."

Elise beamed as she dismissed Jebb. She'd help Seanian change after she'd shared her news and they'd celebrated. Once they were alone, she flung herself against Seanian. "I *am* excited. I've the most wonderful news."

Seanian smiled and wrapped his arms about her. "Oh?"

She cupped Seanian's bearded face in her hands, her heart fluttering. She must start her explanations with an apology. She hurriedly said, "But not from Edouard. I didn't visit him this morning. I visited the veiled witch to obtain her advice about conceiving children. I'm sorry for lying, but I was afraid you'd dissuade me, and we've been attempting fertility spells for an entire year now without success. Fertility spells that the veiled witch advised we stop."

Seanian stiffened, his brow furrowing. Then he sighed. "Yes, I probably would have argued against visiting at first, but I'd have joined you when I couldn't persuade you not to go. Just like I did with Healer Althea. We're husband and wife, and we should be doing such things together. Especially when it involves visiting a poor neighborhood in Ormas and consulting a mysterious seer."

Elise winced and echoed Seanian's sigh. "I know." She carded her hands through his soft tawny hair, which was the same shade as a tygris's mane. Her dearest Seanian always reminded her of the majestic and massive feline who ruled the torrid Tsarkan grasslands. Proud, fierce, and loving. She used her grip on his hair to pull down his head for a gentle kiss. "And I promise I shan't act without you in such matters again. But I was desperate to obtain the witch's advice. I'm sorry."

Exhaling, Seanian brushed his lips against her brow before repeating her earlier words, "I know." He stared into her eyes. "Now tell me everything the veiled witch said."

She detailed her visit to the veiled witch, leaving out nothing, not even the seer's cryptic warnings that would alarm her protective husband.

When she finished, Seanian frowned. "I think we'd be wiser to let matters run their natural course and not attempt the veiled witch's quest. I don't like the sound of our lives never being the same."

Elise almost smiled. Of course her routine-loving husband didn't. But once their lives changed to include their many children, Seanian could build a new routine. 'Twould take time, but he ached to be a father almost as much as she ached to be a mother, so he'd never regret it.

Seanian continued, "Plus, what about my duties here? I'm a councilor and manage a duchy. I can't just leave Calatini. Especially with the nightmara delegation still here, and the royal wedding and Lady Kiera's coronation next week. And what about Arvan?"

Her chest squeezing, she cupped Seanian's face like before. "True, going on our quest shan't be simple, but we can figure it out, and the reward shall be worth it. We'll *finally* have our large family together."

Seanian sighed. "I don't know, Elise. Perhaps we should consider adoption instead. We're already raising Arvan, so we know we can handle caring for children not our own, and adopting children seems more practical and less dangerous than going on a quest to Orandia."

She tensed against Seanian. But she ached to bear *his* children and provide him with the family they needed. He was the devoted husband she deeply loved, and having many children with such a husband had been her lifelong dream. So adopting children unfortunately didn't match the perfect family she'd always imagined.

She shook her head. "Raising Arvan is different than adopting other children would be. He's the son of your childhood best friends, and you two were practically family before you began raising him. Besides, adopting children doesn't provide you with a natural heir to inherit the venerable Farson barony."

Grimacing, Seanian shrugged. "True, but if we never have any natural children, we can petition to have an adopted child be my heir. 'Tis a lengthy, complicated, and expensive process, but 'tis possible."

Elise pursed her lips. "Barely. Such petitions have rarely been successful in Calatini since its founding when many had lost their natural heirs during the catastrophic Stone Wars." She managed to smile up at Seanian. "And why put ourselves through that when we've a chance to have natural children?"

Seanian hummed, his brow still somewhat furrowed.

She slid her arms about Seanian's neck. "We don't need to decide now, but consider attempting the veiled witch's quest, please? Our dreams are worth fighting for." To lighten his brooding, she fluttered her lashes at him with a coy grin. "Enough about that. I should help you change from your riding clothes so you can get to your duties."

His furrowed brow smoothing, Seanian smiled and drew her even closer, and desire surged through her. He drawled, "You helping me change shall only delay me getting to those duties. But making love with my wife is a duty too. An even more important one."

Elise giggled as Seanian tumbled them onto the bed. How she loved her attentive and ardent husband. And he loved her just as much. Before long, he'd agree to attempt the veiled witch's advice, and they'd have their large family together. She could hardly wait.

CHAPTER 1



When Seanian awoke at dawn the day before Summerday over three months later, he drew Elise closer and kissed her like he did every morning. Waking his darling wife with an ardent kiss then making love with her was the best way to start their day. And Elise agreed, thank the Goddess. In their three years of marriage, she'd only refused his morning lovemaking if unwell. But she loved him as fiercely as he loved her and always would. Besides, unlike her twin, she didn't hate mornings or rising early.

He grinned as Elise woke and hungrily deepened their kiss. He and Elise were so well matched—true mates, according to the nightmara, a treasured bond that all nightmara and their human mara clans sought and esteemed. He and Elise were blessed to have found each other. When they'd married, she'd fit into his well-structured world as if she'd always belonged there. Which she did. Not only did Elise enjoy mornings and return his love, but she also adored riding and loved Arvan as much as he did. Despite not having children together yet, they'd built such a wonderful life together.

Not breaking their deep kiss, Seanian drew Elise even closer. But they'd have the many, many boisterous children she'd

always wanted as soon as the Goddess willed it. Hopefully soon, for Elise's sake. She so ached to become a mother. He wanted to be a father too, although the delay didn't distress him like it did her, and he didn't truly care how many children they had. But he shared Elise's dream for her to be a lovingly managing matriarch, and that required a large family. He'd always adored such matriarchs—many Golddell gentlemen did after generations of close interactions with the matriarchal nightmara. Yet another reason he and Elise were true mates.

Kissing and caressing each other everywhere, he and Elise made love with their usual ardent passion and shattered in explosive release.

Remaining entwined afterward, Seanian nuzzled Elise's neck and inhaled her fresh yet floral orange-blossom scent still clinging to her from yesterday. So luscious. If only they could make love again, but they must dress to ensure they managed a proper ride before the council meeting later this morning. He smiled against Elise's skin. Faras and Rosalind, his childhood best friends and Arvan's deceased parents, would have been shocked by his almost insatiable desire for his wife. Sometimes he was too.

His smile turned wry. Growing up, he'd been the sensible and disciplined one, whereas Faras and Rosalind had been intense and wild. They'd never been able to restrain their passion for one another, which was why they'd conceived Arvan when first celebrating Summerday together, leading to their hasty teenage marriage. Despite being his best friends, Faras and Rosalind had never understood his need for order and often called him too controlled. Yet falling in love with Elise during their long courtship, which had begun as friendship but steadily blossomed into love, had unlocked his ardor and made him understand his passionate friends better. Too bad it had been two years after their death.

Seanian murmured against Elise's luscious skin, "Good morning, my love."

Elise purred and arched into his near kiss, obviously seeking more. "Good morning, my dearest Seanian."

Hungry warmth suffused him. Since his elderly parents had passed away fourteen years ago, only Elise called him Seanian. The first time she'd called him that when first confessing her love during Summerday festivities, he'd almost made love to her—despite them not even being betrothed yet because Arvan had still been jealous of Elise and reluctant to accept her. He'd only managed to withdraw after remembering that Arvan had been conceived during similar Summerday festivities and that he loved Elise much too much to risk unleashing the chaos of an unexpected pregnancy on her. Thankfully, Elise's patient warmth and genuine caring had won over Arvan by the end of the season, so he'd finally been able to propose on her natalday, although they'd had to wait until the following spring to marry due to their positions at court.

As tempted by Elise's coy invitation as ever, he kissed her arched neck. Whenever she called him dearest Seanian like she had on that Summerday evening four years ago, he burned to make love with her. But they hadn't time for more lovemaking this morning—'twould disrupt their routine of enjoying a family ride with Arvan before their duties began. So he slowly kissed Elise's neck one final time then said, "We'd better dress. Where do you want to go riding this morning?"

Elise hummed as she carded her hands through his hair. She adored doing that, not a habit he minded, even when it made his body harden further with hunger they couldn't sate—like it was doing now. She answered, "Since you've a council meeting later, how about Jade Garden?"

Seanian forced himself to release Elise and slide from bed. "Jade Garden sounds good." The sprawling garden was one of the largest gardens in Ormas besides the palace gardens and just outside the fashionable area, so 'twas popular for large outdoor events that court attended, like the Summerday festivities he and Elise typically attended there as well as Elise's stepmother's fire

ball last autumn. Riding outside of Ormas would be more enjoyable, but the council meeting unfortunately made that impossible.

Once Jebb and Ann helped them dress, he captured Elise's hand and caressed her palm with his thumb while they headed downstairs to meet Arvan.

When they joined their gangly ward in the entrance hall, Arvan grinned at them as he devoured a roll stuffed with meat and cheese. No doubt his second since his other hand was empty. And he'd probably devour two more after they returned from their ride. Arvan had been perpetually starving since he turned thirteen and ate as much as a manticore, an indomitable yet rare magical creature who devoured half his weight every day and never left remains behind. Between bites, Arvan said, "Morning, Farson, Elise. Where are we riding?"

Seanian smiled while accepting a stuffed roll from a kitchen maid. At Arvan's age sixteen years ago, he'd been just as perpetually starving. And so had Faras. But now he could only eat half of what he used to, probably fortunate for his beloved estate in Golddell. Otherwise, he'd beggar the wealthy lands that had belonged to his family since shortly after Calatini's founding.

He almost sighed. Goddess, how he missed Farson Keep. Even when back in Golddell, he'd sadly not lived there since he'd become Arvan's guardian six years ago because his grieving ten-year-old ward had required the security of his own home after tragically losing his parents to a virulent winter fever. Besides, 'twas better for Golddell's duke to reside at Golddell Castle even if he wasn't yet old enough to manage the duchy.

Burying his longing for home, Seanian began his stuffed roll and waggled his brows at Arvan, who'd not like the answer to his question. "We're riding to Jade Garden."

Arvan grunted. "How dull. I was hoping for Blacke Woods. We've not ridden there for ages."

Elise tsked as she nibbled on her stuffed roll. "You know

Seanian has a council meeting today, so we can't do a lengthy ride. And Jade Garden isn't dull."

When Arvan grouched while finishing his breakfast, Seanian smoothed his beard to hide his smile. Arvan was *definitely* a teenager now. Impudent, intense, and impatient. Yet still sharp-witted and determined with a clear sense of his path. And utterly mad about horses or horse-like magical creatures. He'd manage Golddell well when he assumed that duty at his majority in four years. Faras and Rosalind would have been so proud of him.

Seanian finished his stuffed roll then clapped Arvan's shoulder to console him. "We'll ride to Blacke Woods one day soon. Now, shall we go?"

When Arvan vigorously nodded, Seanian, Elise, and Arvan headed outside to their beloved horses, naturally all ones from Golddell since their duchy bred the best horses in Damensea. Although some baffleheads preferred the overly sensitive Tsarkan horse and some farmers required the massive midshire horse from Childes, the three Golddell horse breeds were invariably energetic, intelligent, hardy, and versatile—the only better rides were the nightmara themselves, or perhaps unicorns or kelpies. Wylde horses were the most rugged and wild, while agyle horses were more refined and agile, and mara ponies were sturdy and compact.

In the stables, they grinned at their three horses, who eagerly nickered and craned forward when they neared. Seanian scratched Cooper's chest the way the brown-dun wylde stallion loved, while Elise petted her rose-gray agyle mare Rose's muzzle, and Arvan slapped his dapple-gray wylde stallion Thunder's shoulder.

Although they all loved their horses, Seanian and Cooper had been together the longest. He'd purchased the rugged yet steady stallion almost seven years ago, but Cooper was still the fastest in the stables and could maintain a grueling pace for hours. A month before their marriage, he'd given Elise the spir-

ited yet sweet Rose because she'd lost her elderly gelding earlier that year, and the two remained delighted with each other. Then three months ago, he and Arvan had purchased the mischievous yet loyal Thunder as Arvan's sixteenth natalday gift, replacing the sturdy mara pony Arvan had ridden until then.

After greeting their horses, they saddled Cooper, Rose, and Thunder themselves with minor assistance from the grooms as they typically did. Although many at court didn't, most from Golddell tended to their own horses when they could because that deepened their loving bond.

Then he, Elise, and Arvan led their horses from the stables, and he grasped Elise's hips to lift her atop Rose like he usually did even though she could easily mount alone. He'd begun doing that during their courtship because 'twas an excellent excuse to sneak a kiss. He often helped her dismount for the same reason.

So before lifting Elise, he leaned forward and brushed his mouth against hers, and tingling surged through him when she gripped his shoulders and drew him closer. Yes, his passionate wife loved sneaking kisses as much as he did. True mates indeed.

He made himself lift Elise into the saddle before their kiss became too heated and it became painful to ride. Ignoring Arvan's usual grumbles about them kissing in front of him, Seanian leapt onto Cooper. He arched his brows at Elise and Arvan. "Ready?"

Arvan huffed a sigh atop Thunder. "I was ready *before* you delayed us by kissing Elise. Must you two insist on being so intimate in public? 'Tis disgusting. Not to mention improper."

Elise laughed while they urged their horses forward, her lovely pale-blue eyes gleaming. "'Tis a parent's or guardian's duty to embarrass their children or wards." As Arvan grunted at that, she continued, "And I doubt you'd find it disgusting or care about impropriety if you were doing the kissing."

When Arvan grimaced, Seanian chuckled and quirked a wry

grin then added, "I suspect you'll be even worse considering your parents. Faras and Rosalind adored kissing—sometimes more—in public." And Arvan had undeniably inherited his parents' intense nature. He just wasn't in love with a lady yet, although he *had* become interested in a mara girl from the clan bound to Moonbud's herd. Arvan had met Asra two autumns ago when they'd visited the Flower Herd to meet the nightmara queen-heir before the renewal of the Nightmara-Calatini Treaty the following summer. Not that Asra, who was training to become a mara guard like her older sister Leila, had returned Arvan's interest. She was two years his senior, after all.

Grimacing fiercer at the reminder of his parents' passionate public kisses, Arvan didn't reply as they began riding through the quiet streets of Ormas. Despite the early hour, they kept their horses to a walk until they reached Jade Garden. The city was no place for galloping.

As soon as they entered the sprawling garden sparkling with dew, Arvan arched his brows at them. "Mind if I gallop?"

Seanian waved Arvan forward. The teenager was always happiest when galloping. He drawled to tease Arvan, "Just don't let Thunder trip."

Then he and Elise both grinned at Arvan's sharp snort. A skilled rider who'd not let his pony or horse trip since he was nine, Arvan disliked his skill being doubted, even in jest, as did many his tender age.

Once Arvan had thundered off, Seanian smiled at Elise. "Alone at last."

Her lips twitching, Elise tsked and shook her head. "Don't pretend like you don't enjoy our family rides."

He leaned over and briefly kissed Elise's too tempting lips. "I do enjoy them. I simply enjoy kissing you without Arvan's grumbles."

Elise giggled and caressed his beard as he straightened. "And yet his grumbles never stop you."

Seanian smiled broader. Just like they never stopped his

passionate Elise. How he loved her. "As you said, 'tis our duty to embarrass Arvan." He waved toward the nearest path. "Shall we?"

Elise nodded, and they urged Cooper and Rose down the path. They started at a walk but soon were trotting then cantering then galloping. Like Arvan, they both adored galloping, particularly with each other. The wind in their hair, the power of their horse beneath them, and the skill needed for turns and obstacles were all so addictive. They halted their spontaneous race at the far side of the garden near a gentle stream, ending neck and neck like usual.

His pulse still swift from their race, he grinned at Elise when he leapt to the ground as both Cooper and Rose began to drink their fill from the stream. Elise's silky blonde hair was vaguely disheveled with loose tendrils glowing in the morning sun. So lovely. He helped Elise dismount, allowing her soft body to slide against his, making his pulse surge even swifter. While he helped her down, she smiled into his eyes and twined her arms about his neck like she always did when they were alone. Then moving as one, he lowered his head while she lifted hers until their mouths met in an ardent kiss.

Eventually, Seanian wrested their mouths apart. Jade Garden wasn't the place to make love, although they often came close when visiting here. He let his gaze drift about the peaceful garden as he gently kissed Elise's brow, making her sigh and kiss his jaw in return. Perhaps because Jade Garden was the first place they'd almost made love, they couldn't resist nearly doing so again whenever they returned. Or perhaps 'twas because the Summerday festivities, private rides, and outdoor court events they enjoyed here lent themselves to making love. Yet either way, a public garden still wasn't an appropriate place to make love to a beloved wife, except perhaps on Summerday.

Echoing Elise's sigh, he forced himself to release her and step back. As he did, his gaze caught on a tiny spot of soft blue in the shadows near the stream. He smiled. Forget-me-nots. What luck

to stumble across Elise's favorite flowers here even though most had finished blooming last month. These must be some of the rare forget-me-nots that sporadically bloomed through midsummer.

Seanian bent and plucked a few of the forget-me-nots then offered them to Elise. "For you, my love."

Elise buried her face in the tiny bouquet of small flowers with five soft-blue petals and charming yellow centers. Gorgeous. As gorgeous as when she'd worn them in her hair along with a matching gown at their wedding ceremony. If only he could find a more permanent token of their love than those ephemeral flowers. He'd been hunting for a firegem or a gemstone in that precise shade since they'd married without success. Sadly, such light-blue sapphires—whether magical firegems made of hardened dragon flame or ordinary gemstones mined from the land—were rare.

Elise beamed at him over her forget-me-nots. "You're always so romantic. I can't *wait* to celebrate Summerday here tomorrow."

He drew Elise against him, his heart quickening yet again. He could hardly wait for that either. "I'm only romantic with you."

Elise beamed brighter. "That's all that matters. Besides, I'd not want you to be romantic with anyone else, my love."

Unable to resist, Seanian was lowering his head to kiss Elise once more when Arvan called from behind him, "Goddess, not *again*. You two are worse than newlyweds. And don't you have a council meeting to attend, Farson?"

He and Elise traded a wry yet resigned glance. So he did, and he'd be late if they tarried longer. He made himself withdraw and didn't help Elise mount Rose. Sneaking further kisses would have to wait until another ride. A councilor mustn't be late or miss a council meeting, unless they were unavoidably occupied like the Duke of Oakmoor currently was. Although King Devon and Queen Kiera had claimed the rakehell duke and the royal witch Lady Juliet were handling a private royal matter when

they'd disappeared from court, the two were actually trapped in the duke's townhouse until she broke his beast curse.

Seanian grimaced while he swung atop Cooper. He and Elise only knew the truth behind the Duke of Oakmoor and Lady Juliet's absence because the duke had initially kidnapped Elise's twin brother's betrothed in an attempt to break his curse. Fortunately, Edouard had rescued Pippa before eloping with her, and the royal witch had taken Pippa's place despite the well-known dislike between her and the rakehell duke. Although all that had happened over a month ago now, Edouard and Pippa had yet to return from Hazeen Isle, and the Duke of Oakmoor and Lady Juliet had yet to emerge from Oakmoor House, so Goddess knew how they fared. Hopefully well.

He slanted Elise a concerned glance as they rode from Jade Garden. Usually when she and her twin were apart, they exchanged mirror calls at least twice a week, but she'd not heard from Edouard since his letter informing her that he was eloping with Pippa, and his lengthy silence was worrying her. Please let Edouard simply be engrossed in being newly wed. Elise would be devastated if anything happened to her dear twin and his bubbly wife.

Seanian frowned at Cooper's reins. And although matters at court were mostly calm now, Calatini would suffer if the Duke of Oakmoor and Lady Juliet remained trapped forever. The duke was the kingdom's suave Minister of Foreign Relations and possessed no direct heir to his title, while Lady Juliet was Calatini's illustrious and skilled royal witch. Both would be difficult to replace.

When the two had disappeared, they'd been helping the Orandians get settled in Ormas. Lady Driscoll was Calatini's first ambassador in a decade from Orandia. The magical island kingdom was led by a powerfully prescient seer and predominated by witches, making both the duke and the royal witch vital to handling the Orandians, even though the Orandians had since settled into their lives here. Then a few days ago, a prominent

Varkhoran lord had unexpectedly arrived at the Varkhoran embassy. The warrior kingdom of Varkhora was the largest of the twelve kingdoms east of Calatini, and the fierce Lord Sabine had refused to disclose why he was visiting. Calatini needed the duke's smooth charm and possibly the royal witch's scrying to handle that as well.

Once he, Elise, and Arvan returned to Golddell House, Seanian changed from his riding clothes then briefly kissed Elise farewell before taking the carriage to the palace. When he strode into the council room, he took his usual seat between Elise's cousin Aragon, who served as the Minister of Agriculture, and Lord Nolan, the Minister of Natural Resources. After nodding good morning to Lord Nolan, he turned to Aragon and asked, "How is little Isabel?"

As he'd expected, Aragon beamed. Elise's dedicated cousin, who was also King Devon's cousin and best friend, was besotted with his eldest child who'd been born on Aragon's natalday nearly six months ago. His wife Selena and his parents the influential Duke and Duchess of Childes were just as besotted. Aragon replied, "Izzy is wonderful. She sat up without help for the first time yesterday."

Seanian smiled despite the pang piercing his chest. When they finally had children, Elise would doubtless be as besotted with them and excited to tell everyone about their development as her cousin was with his daughter. "How exciting. Elise shall be thrilled when I tell her."

Before either he or Aragon could talk further, an almost glowing King Devon and Queen Kiera bustled into the council room, so Seanian and the ten other councilors—plus Lady Escana, who was acting as the Minister of Foreign Relations during the Duke of Oakmoor's absence—quieted to allow the royal couple to open the council meeting. Clearly they'd some exciting news.

Yet after they'd opened the council meeting, the royal couple simply asked what updates everyone else had.

Once Lady Ducharme updated them about the bothersome Tsarkan pirates and Lord Islaye updated them about the Magehaven ore, which mercifully showed no signs of exploding again, the elderly Duke of Osbourne cleared his throat and said, "I've some troubling foreign developments. There was some kind of upset at the Orandian embassy this past week, although my spies couldn't unearth any details. And they also couldn't unearth why that young Varkhoran lord decided to visit Ormas."

Seanian frowned. The wily Minister of Intelligence's spies rarely had such little success. Not good. Lady Juliet really needed to break the Duke of Oakmoor's curse soon so that they could resume their duties.

The elderly duke sighed then smiled at Lady Escana as he continued, "Although Lady Escana is doing a marvelous job acting as our Minister of Foreign Relations, I do wish the Duke of Oakmoor was here to deal with both situations." He turned to King Devon and Queen Kiera. "Any word about when he and Lady Juliet shall finish handling your private matter?"

King Devon and Queen Kiera traded a glance, then Queen Kiera murmured, "Not yet. However, that upset at the Orandian embassy was a mere magical mishap involving Lady Driscoll and Sir Lorcan. 'Tis already resolved and nothing to worry about."

Seanian swallowed a hum. Curious that the royal couple weren't revealing the details of a magical mishap involving the Orandian ambassador and her husband. Either 'twas truly nothing or too sensitive to reveal.

The studious Lord Islaye, the Minister of Magic, shook his head with a chuckle. "A magical mishap likely caused by Sir Lorcan's hunger for magical knowledge. He's the most rapacious lore witch I've ever met."

Seanian chuckled along with the others. True, considering the Orandians openly said that Sir Lorcan's hunger for magical knowledge was why they'd decided to be the ones to travel to Calatini when their seer declared Orandia must send ambas-

sadors now that the Magehaven ore crisis had resolved. Both Lady Driscoll and her husband were powerful witches—she a sea witch and he a lore witch—and Orandian witches rarely left their magical isle.

Once everyone fell silent, King Devon frowned and said, "That young Varkhoran's unexpected visit troubles me more than the Orandians. From Ambassador Rossi's fawning, Lord Sabine must be exceedingly prominent in their kingdom despite his age, and Varkhorans don't approve of Calatini because women are equals here. So why would he visit? His strict silence on the subject is troubling too."

Seanian and the others all glanced at one another, then Lady Escana murmured, "Well, when we spoke, Lord Sabine didn't appear to mind powerful ladies. Perhaps 'tis why he left his home kingdom."

The farsighted Lady Ducharme inclined her head. "I received that impression as well. Lord Sabine wasn't upset or dismissive when he learned *I* was the Minister of Defense. Unlike his Ambassador Rossi, who still can't bear speaking with me despite having lived here for over four decades."

Seanian nearly grimaced. Likewise, Ambassador Rossi had refused to speak with Moonbud or her delegation when they'd been in Ormas to renew the Nightmara-Calatini Treaty last season because nightmara were matriarchal. Thankfully, the nightmara queen-heir had found the Varkhoran's refusal amusing rather than offensive.

When everyone finished discussing Lord Sabine, King Devon and Queen Kiera traded another glance, and the queen began to beam. She said, "Before we adjourn, we've some exciting news. I've fallen pregnant, and Calatini's next heir should be born in seven months."

Grinning and squeezing his wife's hand, King Devon added, "Please don't share that news at court. So far we've only told our family and close friends, and we want to wait until Kiera's pregnancy is further along before announcing it to the kingdom."

As he and the others offered their sincere and hearty congratulations—except for Aragon, who'd clearly been one of the family and close friends the royal couple had already told—Seanian gripped his knee beneath the table. Elise would be devastated when she heard that Queen Kiera was pregnant after only being married three months. They'd been trying for *three years* without success, and even the fertility spells they'd attempted for a year hadn't helped them. So many of Elise's relatives or her family's relatives were having children, and they'd all married after him and Elise. First Aragon and Selena, then Hawke and Wren, and now King Devon and Queen Kiera. And surely Edouard and Pippa would conceive soon too.

While Queen Kiera said they'd also some changes to make before announcing her pregnancy to the kingdom during their royal summer masquerade next month, Seanian exhaled and gritted a smile to feign that he was truly listening. Although the veiled witch's advice to Elise about conceiving children had seemed too uncertain to risk, especially given the seer's cryptic warning of complications from such a quest, perhaps he and Elise should do so. She'd her heart set on having natural children rather than adopting some, so everyone else falling pregnant while they remained childless would eventually destroy her. He loved her too deeply to ever allow that. He'd simply have to protect Elise no matter what complications arose from attempting the veiled witch's quest.

He made himself release his knee. He'd discuss traveling to Orandia to consult the Orandian seer with Elise as soon as he returned to Golddell House. They'd not be able to leave immediately, but no current matters required his direct attention as the Minister of Internal Relations, so King Devon and Queen Kiera would surely grant them permission to leave Calatini. He exhaled. Elise would be ecstatic about his change of heart. She'd been attempting to convince him to agree to attempting the veiled witch's quest for the past three months. So at least he'd have his beloved wife's joy to look forward to.