

## Chapter 1

### *Sunset Beach, Isle of Calberna*

“Higher, Dilys! Higher!” Pangi Mahilo’s high-pitched squeal pealed out across the pink sand beach.

“Higher, eh?” Laughing at the squirming boy in his arms, Dilys Merimydon, Prince of the Calbernan Isles, cast a quick glance at Pangi’s mother, who rolled her eyes at the son Dilys had been tossing in the air but still nodded her permission. “All right then,” Dilys told Pangi, “higher it is. And you’d best hold on to your belly!” With a grin, Dilys tossed the gangly little boy several feet into the air over his head. Since Dilys stood seven feet tall, that meant the child flew a good ten or more feet above the ground.

Pangi’s piercing shrieks of laughter startled a flock of seabirds hovering near the Calbernan Islanders who had gathered on the pink sand of Sunset Beach to celebrate the marriage of one of the sailors in Dilys’s fleet.

“Me next! Me next!” came the chorus of childish pleading as Dilys set Pangi down.

“You’ve started something,” murmured Dilys’s cousin, Arilon Calmyria, with a grin for the horde of clamoring children.

“I always do.” Dilys loved children, loved interacting with them and making them laugh. Maybe it was because he’d never had brothers and sisters of his own. Or maybe it was because he longed for a wife and children of his own with a ferocity of emotion that even among passionate, larger-than-life Calbernans was rare. “I have a particular talent for entertaining the little ones,” he added.

“True. That’s why you’re the party favorite.”

“*Ono—no—*” he corrected with a grin, “I’m the party favorite due to my good looks and charm. Isn’t that right, Beno?” Dilys directed the question to one of the four-year-olds clinging to his leg like a barnacle.

“Right!” Beno cried.

Dilys rewarded the boy by plucking him out of the crowd and tossing him high into the air.

Nearby, another of Dilys’s cousins, Ryllian Ocea, laughed and said, “The veracity of answers provided in exchange for personal gain is questionable at best.” Ryll was studying law in preparation for his pending retirement from the sea and the mercenary work all adult male Calbernans performed until marriage.

That change of career would be happening within the year . . . for all of them. Ryll would take his place in his mother’s law practice. Ari would be working with his parents at House Calmyria’s shipbuilding business. And Dilys would begin his training to take over the daily operations of House Merimydon’s vast shipping and agricultural empire.

Because tomorrow, Dilys, Ari, Ryll, and every marriage-worthy son of the sea who’d sailed with them last winter to the Æsir Isles—the northern archipelago that included the kingdoms of Wintercraig, Summerlea, and Seahaven—would be returning to those shores to court and claim wives from among the unwed and widowed women of Wintercraig and Summerlea. And once they were wed, their mercenary days were done.

As if reading Dilys's thoughts, Ari draped an arm across Ryll's broad shoulders and pointed his chin towards the bride and bridegroom, both clad in shimmering sea blue, with circlets of fuschia and yellow flowers on their heads, their necks draped in plump stoles made from dark green *tili* leaves dotted with tiny, delicate white *merimydia* blossoms. "Just think, cousins, before the year is out, that will be us standing on the beach beside our *lianas*, grinning like we just won the All Isles Cup." The All Isles Cup was Calberna's most coveted prize in competitive sailing.

"Speaking as a former All Isles champion," Dilys said, "I can promise you I'll be grinning much, much more on my wedding day."

"I know that's true," Ryll agreed. It was no secret among Dilys's close friends just how impatient he was to close the youthful, unwed chapter of his life and move on to the next.

Four years ago, Dilys had earned his *ulumi-lia*—the tattoo curling across his right cheekbone that proclaimed him a man worthy of taking a wife. Most Calbernans wed within a year, two at most, once they earned that mark, but not Dilys. And not by his choice, either. He'd been sailing the sea, fighting other people's wars, for more than fifteen years now. He was more than ready for the comfort and joy of a wife and family.

Unfortunately, because his mother was both the *Myerial*—the ruling queen—of Calberna and the Matriarch of House Merimydon, one of Calberna's oldest and most venerated royal Houses, and because Dilys was his mother's only child, his marriage had become a matter of state.

He carried great power in his pure Calbernan blood—power that should have been merged with the pure blood of another great Calbernan House, not diluted by marriage to an *oulani*—an outlander—but the death of his childhood betrothed, Nyamialine Calmyria, had ended those hopes. And because any son of Calberna who wed an outlander remained a part of his mother's House rather than joining his wife's, marriage between Dilys and an *oulani* woman opened the door for a half-blood daughter to become the next *Myerial* of Calberna and the next Matriarch of House Merimydon.

A committee of the Queen's Council, led by Dilys's uncle, Calivan Merimydon, had therefore spent years investigating the bloodlines and magical gifts of Mystral's most powerful families to select a suitable bride for their prince. The committee, which Dilys's cousin Ari had jokingly labeled 'the Bridehunters', had concluded that Dilys should wed one of the daughters of the Summer King, but before the marriage could be arranged, Prince Falcon of Summerlea ran off with the Winter King's betrothed, murdered that same king's heir while making his escape, and threw Wintercraig and Summerlea into three long years of war.

It was only now—after two negotiated treaties and four years of war, rebellion, and a ferocious battle to prevent the return of a dread god who would have cast the world into endless winter—that Dilys was finally setting off to claim his outlander bride. Not all Calbernans were happy this day had come. A group calling themselves the Pureblood Alliance had been quite vocal in their opposition to Dilys taking an *oulani* bride, and they'd gained the support of quite a few powerful Houses.

"Is Spring still the Season of choice?" Ryll asked.

Dilys tossed another boy high in the air, caught him, set him down, and shrugged in answer to Ryll's question before picking up the next boy and sending him flying up into the air. "If my uncle has his way."

Spring Coruscate, eldest of the late Summer King's daughters, was the wife Uncle Calivan and the Bridehunters had decided upon for Dilys. She was wise, capable, and from all reports, possessed the strongest magic of the three princesses known as the Seasons of Summerlea. Even though Summerlea's weathergifts never passed down to children outside the kingdom's direct royal line, Spring had other gifts—including a substantial talent for growing things, a gift that would benefit House Merimydon's agricultural enterprises nicely. She would make an acceptable mother for Calberna's next queen, they had decided. Assuming, of course, that the gods blessed the union with a treasured daughter for House Merimydon while Alysaldria lived. After the marriage, Dilys was also expected to combine the strength of Spring's weathergift with the power of his own seagifts to reassert Calbernan power in the Olemas Ocean, where a band of pirates had been causing trouble and disrupting trade for the last year.

Ari cast him a sly grin. "Any chance you might win Autumn instead? Just, you know, by accident?"

Dilys laughed. Autumn Coruscate, the youngest of the three Seasons, was widely recognized as one of the most beautiful women in the world—if not the most beautiful. Her weathergift was no insignificant talent either. "Anything is possible, cousin."

In fact, of the three Seasons, the only one who had been ruled out by the Bridehunters was the middle daughter, Summer. So far as the Bridehunters could discover, she possessed no magic beyond a weak weathergift that she used primarily to keep cooling breezes flowing during the hottest summer months.

Not that Dilys intended to let the Bridehunters make the final decision about which princess he should wed, but in the case of Summer Coruscate, he had to agree with their assessment. From all reports, she was unsuitable. Her temperament too gentle for the mother of Calberna's future queen. Though many Calbernans found great peace and joy wedded to sweet-natured *oulani* women, Dilys needed a wife who would command the respect of his people, not simply claim his devotion. His daughter—their daughter—would need a mother sharp and strong enough to be an asset at navigating the political undercurrents of Calbernan court.

One of the fathers walked over to retrieve his sons from the crowd around Dilys. "Food's ready, my sons. Come eat."

The boys pouted. "But, *Dede*, we haven't had our turn yet."

A hint of sternness stole some of the indulgence from Dilys's expression. One of the lessons Calbernan sons learned early was obedience to authority. As they grew older, their lives might depend on responding with alacrity to another's command. "Do as your *dede* says, boys. I'll fly you later, after you eat."

"*Tey*, Dilys," the boys agreed glumly. They trudged off after their father with slouched shoulders, but Dilys was pleased to see that they both perked up and pasted happy smiles on their faces before joining their mother, a soft-spoken *oulani* woman with creamy skin and pale green eyes. They snuggled next to her, telling her something that made her laugh

and kiss them both. Good. Until he wed, a Calbernan son's first duty was to honor his mother and to bring her joy in all things.

"Dilys." Ari nudged him with an elbow.

"What?" Dilys followed Ari's gaze towards a familiar Calbernan approaching from the city. One of the *Myerial's* personal assistants was walking briskly towards the beach.

"Sorry, little fry. Looks like I'm done for the day." Dilys freed himself of the crowd of children and quickly closed the distance between himself and his mother's assistant.

"*Moa Myerialua.*" My prince. The queen's assistant thumped his right fist over his heart in a Calbernan salute. "Please, forgive the interruption. The *Myerial* requests your presence."

"What's wrong?" Dilys's mother wasn't the sort to recall Dilys from a wedding without a very good reason.

"Forgive me, *moa Myerialua*, but I cannot say. I was commanded only to locate you and escort you to the palace."

"Of course. Just give me a few minutes to take my leave of the bride and groom."

"What's up, cuz?" Ari asked as Dilys tracked down the newlyweds to congratulate them on their union and apologize for his need to leave.

"Where are we headed?" Ryll added.

The instant, unquestioning way they followed him made emotion squeeze hard. They always had his back. The three of them had become more like brothers than cousins since that horrible day when Dilys's childhood betrothed, Nyamialine, had died in the same terrible accident that had claimed the lives of Calberna's queen, *Myerial Siavaluana II* and her sole heir and daughter, the princess Sianna. That one terrible day had forged Ari, Ryll and Dilys's brotherhood in bonds of shared grief. Nyamialine lost to her brother Ari and her betrothed Dilys. Sianna lost to Ryll's elder brother Ruluin, and Ruluin lost to Ryll when Ru committed *kepu* with so many others because of that terrible day.

"It's all right, you two," he told them. "The *Myerial* sent for me, that's all. Stay here. Enjoy the day, and dance the *calipua* for the bride."

"Are you sure, Dilys?" Ari asked.

He wasn't. Something was definitely up, but he smiled with reassuring confidence. "I'm sure."

#### *Cali Va'Lua, Royal Palace of Calberna*

Half an hour later, Dilys strode into Calberna's soaring throne room. Sunlight filtered through the clear blue waters that surrounded the submerged glass chamber, illuminating the schools of fish, dolphins and other sea creatures that swam in the depths of Cali Va'Lua's central lagoon. At the far end of the room, on a golden throne that rose from a bed of scarlet coral, sat Calberna's revered and beloved *Myerial*, *Alysaldria I*, Treasure of Treasures, Queen of the Calbernan Isles.

Dilys's mother.

As always, she looked beautiful and regal, draped in cool, seafoam-green silk. The long swaths of her obsidian hair were piled high and decorated with brilliant pink, fuschia, and scarlet anemones, while a single wrist-thick cascade of hair, gathered every foot with gleaming pearl bands, spilled over her left shoulder. She also looked tired. Dilys tucked his

concern carefully out of sight before approaching the throne. He stopped at the base of the coral steps and dropped to one knee, bowing his head in greeting and submission.

“*Moa Myerial*.” My queen. Had they been alone he would have called her *Nima*, Mother, but this was no informal meeting, not with the Lord Chancellor of Calberna, the matriarchs of five royal Houses, the High Priest of Numahao, and half a dozen high-ranking officials all gathered in the room as well. “You sent for me?”

His mother did not smile in greeting as she usually did. Whatever this was, it was bad. But of course, he’d already surmised as much, both from the manner of the summons and the throne room’s high-ranking assemblage.

“The Shark attacked the convoy we were escorting to Ere,” a brusque masculine voice replied at his back. Dilys turned to face his mother’s twin brother, Calivan Merimydon, Lord Chancellor of Calberna. “Your cousin Fyerin’s ship, the *Spindrift*, was sunk. There were no survivors.”

“What?” For one long, frozen moment, Dilys couldn’t believe he’d heard right.

For the last year, pirates led by a mysterious figure known only as the Shark had been harrying ships sailing through the Olemas Ocean northwest of Calberna. The attacks had become so frequent and increasingly brazen that Calberna had begun offering armed military escort to ships sailing anywhere in or near the Olemas. But while the pirates could—and had—attacked even ships sailing under the Calbernan flag of protection, the idea that they would confront a Calbernan-crewed ship of any sort was beyond comprehension. Calbernans ruled the seas! There were no better shipbuilders. No better naval tacticians. And thanks to Calbernan seagifts, the oceans themselves obeyed Calbernan command. To confront a Calbernan on the sea was suicide. Or so it had been for millennia.

One time—and one time only—a massive armada comprised of the naval fleets of a dozen nations had assembled against the might of Calberna. Had attacked them not just on the seas but in their own waters. Outnumbered more than one hundred to one, not even the greatest magic Calberna had ever possessed had been enough to rout the invaders. At least not before Calberna had been dealt a blow from which they were still struggling to recover, twenty-five hundred years later. The Slaughter of the Sirens, that invasion was called. Or to native Islanders, simply, the Slaughter. A bloody, vengeful act that had nearly caused the extinction of the Calbernan race.

But this? A single pirate had not only attacked but sunk a heavily armed Calbernan military vessel? Such a thing had never happened. Ever.

“There must be some mistake. That’s simply not possible.”

“Word of the attack came from Prince Nemuan, who found and searched the wreckage himself. The convoy was looted and sunk as well.” Calivan’s expression was grim. Nemuan was the son of the former *Myerial*. Though he and Dilys were far from the best of friends, as a prince of Calberna, his word was beyond dispute. “There were no survivors.”

Dilys cast a concerned glance at his mother. Now he understood the weary sense of frailty about her. She had loved Fyerin as deeply as Dilys. Everyone had loved him. Fyerin was the sort of Calbernan who drew people’s affection as surely as a blossom drew honeybees. Ari was much the same way. Full of laughter and courage, brimming with loyalty, daring, joy, a truly vibrant spirit.

“And Nemuan’s sure it was the Shark?”

“He’s sure. He found Fyerin’s body in the hold of the ship.”

Dilys sucked in a breath and quickly veiled his gaze to hide the telltale flare of golden fire as emotion-fed power bled into his eyes. The Shark was careful not to leave behind witnesses to his crimes—that was once of the reasons he hadn’t yet been hunted down and stopped—but he clearly wanted credit for his kills as well. The captain of every ship he sank was found locked in the hold of his sunken ship, gutted like a fish, tongue and eyes missing, forehead branded with the symbol of a shark. The horrifying consensus of those who had examined the Shark’s victims was that they’d been alive for the process. The thought of Fyerin dying such a death made Dilys’s battle fangs descend and his claws spring out from the backs of his nail beds, the sharp points biting into the palms of his hands as he curled his fingers into fists.

He shoved the pain down and chained it with cords of adamantine steel. Loss hurt, but as the commander of Calberna’s First Fleet, his task now was not to mourn, but to prevent further losses.

“Sir.” Dilys turned to the admiral of Calberna’s Navy. “Until we bring these murderous *krillos* to justice, I suggest we reroute all nonessential Denbe Ocean trade around Cape Stag or through the Straits of Kardouhm.” That would cost Calberna a pretty penny. Circling around the Ardullan continent by way of Cape Stag would add weeks or even months to most voyages, and while the Straits of Kardouhm provided a shorter route from Calberna to the Denbe Ocean and all the rich markets of the east, the Omar of Kardouhm charged a high tax on every vessel sailing through his waters.

The admiral nodded. “The Council approved that measure not ten minutes ago, Commander. I’ve also sent word that every merchant ship sailing within a hundred miles of the Olemas Ocean should have a military escort. Two battle galleys to every merchant. Half a dozen to guard every convoy.”

“I will, of course, cancel the upcoming voyage to Wintercraig,” Dilys said.

“Ono.” No. The sharp denial came from Calberna’s queen. “You will do no such thing.”

“Alys . . .” Calivan’s use of his sister’s pet name told Dilys that this was an argument they’d been having for a while. He never called the *Myerial* “Alys” in front of members of the court unless she was out-stubborning him.

“Ono, Calivan. And I mean it. There are more than enough young men in our navy to deal with these pirates. Dilys and every Calbernan who has earned the right to seek a wife from among the women of the *Æsir* Isles will sail to Wintercraig next week, as planned.”

“He should at least know he has the opportunity to wed an *imlani* and keep the bloodline pure.” This came from Dessandra Merimynos, distant cousin of the late queen, Siavaluana, and current Matriarch of House Merimynos.

Alysaldria pressed her lips tight, and her golden eyes flashed with irritation.

Dilys glanced around at the high-ranking officials assembled in the room and realized that the pirate attack and Fyerin’s death weren’t the real reason he’d been summoned here. “What *imlani*? What are you talking about?”

Calberna’s acting Minister of Internal Affairs stepped forward. “Loto Sami was aboard the *Spindrift*. As you may know, he was betrothed to Nyree Calagi’s daughter, Coralee.”

“They want you to marry Coralee Calagi,” Alysaldria interjected.

“It’s in the best interest of Calberna to keep the royal bloodline pure,” the minister said.

“It’s not in my son’s best interest,” she snapped. “It’s not in House Merimydion’s best interest. Coralee is fifteen years old! Even if the betrothal contract could be dissolved, my son would have to wait at least another five years to wed her—who knows how long it would be before she could bear a child—let alone a daughter—if her grief for Loto makes her unable to claim her mate as she should?”

“Alys . . .” Calivan murmured.

She glared at him, her great golden eyes flashing with irritation. “Don’t take their side, Cal. You know my feelings on this matter. Dilys has waited long enough—at your insistence, no less! And theirs!” She jabbed an accusatory finger in the direction of the other matriarchs.

“I don’t understand,” Dilys interjected, hoping to calm his mother’s temper. “The betrothal contract between House Sami and House Calagi was signed in blood and salt. It is inviolable. I couldn’t marry Coralee even if I wanted to.”

The Slaughter had robbed Calberna of the magic of the Sirens, a loss that had not only weakened Calberna’s might but also resulted in a dangerous drop in birthrate of *imlani* females, especially truly gifted ones. That was the reason families like House Merimydion and all the other royal Houses had standing betrothal contracts negotiated decades, even centuries, before the birth of a pureblood *imlani* daughter. They had been meticulously cultivating the royal bloodlines to pool the greatest magics of Calberna into their female offspring in an attempt to bring back the long lost power of the Sirens.

“So we have all believed,” the minister replied. “But the high priest has been researching the subject for months.” The minister gestured to the High Priest of Numahao, standing beside him. “It was, in fact, your justification for breaking the contract with the Summer King last winter that gave him the idea.”

The high priest nodded. “When you broke the contract with the Summer King to save Calberna and Mystral from the threat of the Ice King,” the priest said, “that got me wondering if a betrothal contract had ever been dissolved for similar reasons. I had to go back nearly to the time of the Slaughter, but there is precedence for dissolving a betrothal contract if, by doing so, such a dissolution will prevent harm to the line of *Myerials*. House Sami has already agreed to step aside in the best interests of Calberna.” He bowed in the direction of the Matriarch of House Sami.

Alysaldria gripped the arms of her throne and said, “I will confer with my son and the Lord Chancellor in private.”

The assembled personages bowed and exited the throne room.

“You know this is a good offer, Alys,” Calivan said when the doors closed behind them. “An *imlani* bride from a royal bloodline? It’s the finest marriage Dilys could hope for.”

“It would have been, had the betrothal taken place while Dilys and Coralee were still children. They would have had time to form the emotional ties necessary for a proper claiming. But Coralee has had fifteen years to bond to Loto. You saw them together, same as I did. Their ties were strong and deep. Her grief will be, too.”

“And we would all be here to help her overcome that grief. You sell Dilys short, Alys. If he stays here in Calberna for the next five years, and spends that time with Coralee, I have no doubt he can win her heart as fully and completely as Loto Sami ever did. He is your son, after all. His gifts are many and great.”

“Dilys could charm gold from a dragon. That’s beside the point.”

“No, that is the point. If anyone can heal Coralee’s heart and form a bond with her strong enough to sire the daughters we all need, it’s Dilys. And do not forget, Coralee will be *Donima* of House Calagi one day. Even if she bears only sons, they will be sons of a pure and powerful royal bloodline, guaranteed *imlani* brides of their own.”

“And what is House Sami getting in return?” Her eyes narrowed. “My uncle Aleki’s daughter Aleakali Maru will be the next *Myerial* if Dilys has no daughter while I live. I have heard rumors that Aleakali is expecting a daughter. I’ll wager House Sami has surrendered the contract for Coralee in exchange for a betrothal contract to Aleakali’s daughter. Why wed a son of House Sami to a Calagi when that son could wed a future *Myerial* instead?”

“If that’s true, then why do we not approach Aleakali ourselves and propose that Dilys should wed her daughter?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Alysaldria snapped. “Dilys earned his *ulumi-lia* four long years ago. I don’t want him waiting five more years for a wife, and you suggest making him wait another twenty?”

“Perhaps you should ask Dilys what he wants. Perhaps he would not mind waiting a few more years for an *imlani* bride? Perhaps he would even prefer to betroth himself to a future *Myerial* of Calberna.”

“And perhaps pigs will grow gills and swim with the kracken.”

Under any other circumstances, Dilys would have been fighting to smother a laugh at that sharp-tongued remark. As large and loving as his mother’s heart might be, she also possessed a ferocious temper, an iron will, and a wit that had fangs and battle claws of its own.

“Betrothing Dilys to an infant not yet born is out of the question,” his mother continued, “but as for the Calagi girl, never let it be said I made this decision without considering my son’s wishes.” Alysaldria turned to Dilys. “*Moa elua*, my son, you have a chance to wed an *imlani* bride from a fine, strong House. And though I am impatient to see your future settled, five years is not twenty. Coralee Calagi is a beautiful girl, with many gifts. She will become Matriarch of House Calagi when her mother is gone. You and your children will want for nothing, and your blood—our blood—will make House Calagi even stronger than it is today. It is, as Calivan has pointed out, a fine and advantageous match, better than I could have hoped for after the death of our dear Nyamialine. If you want her, say the word.”

“Well,” he replied guardedly, “if I waited and wed an *imlani*, that would eliminate the friction between you and the other *Donimari*, who fear a half-blood inheriting the Sea Throne.”

“I don’t care about that.” His mother waved impatiently. “The ones objecting the loudest have a vested interest in seeing the Sea Throne go to my cousin Aleakali. They’ve seized upon Loto Sami’s untimely death as an excuse to grab the power they crave. Where were these concerned citizens when Nyamialine died? Did any one of them offer to



surrender their own House's betrothal contracts to the son of the new *Myerial*? *Ono*, they did not. So, I'm not asking what they want, I'm asking what you want."

Dilys hesitated. It wasn't the delay that gave him pause. He'd already waited four years after all. Five more years wouldn't be such a long time. But he had loved Nyamialine, his childhood betrothed. Even though they'd only been children together, her death had stolen the joy from his heart for years. He knew that Coralee, who had spent her whole lifetime loving and being loved by Loto Sami, would not mend the wound of that loss in five short years. Not even if Dilys gave up the sea and spent every moment by her side. Perhaps it was wrong and selfish of him, but he wanted a wife capable of loving him, not mourning the betrothed she'd loved and lost.

"*Nima*," he finally said, "I will do whatever you feel is best for Calberna and House Merimydion. If you wish me to wed Coralee Calagi, then I will do so with proper joy in my heart."

"But?" his mother prompted.

"But if the choice is mine, then I would sail for Konumarr tomorrow, as planned."

Alysaldria sat back and smiled. "Your desire is mine as well. It is decided, then."

"Alys—" Calivan started to object, until his twin's commanding gaze silenced him.

"Lord Chancellor," the *Myerial* said formally, "please recall the others so that I may give them my decision."

The Queen had spoken. Clearly realizing further protest was futile, Calivan bowed stiffly and gave the guards at the door the order to open the throne-room door. He and Dilys both stood beside the throne, presenting a united front as the others entered. To Calivan's credit, no matter what his personal opinions on a matter might be, once the queen decided a course of action, not by word or deed did he ever make his objections known to another.

"Sealords, *Donimari*," Alysaldria nodded to officials and the matriarchs. "The decision has been made. The prince and his men sail tomorrow for the winter lands to court and claim the wives they have earned the right to seek."

"*Moa Myerial!*" the Minister of Internal Affairs protested.

She held up a hand to silence him. To the matriarchs, she said, "My son is twenty-nine. He earned his *ulumi-lia* four years ago, yet still he is unwed. At your behest." Alysaldria turned to regard her Minister of Internal Affairs sternly. "Five—almost six—years ago, you and Calivan convinced me and my Council that Dilys should wait to chose his *liana* so that we could investigate all potential brides and select a union that would best serve Calberna and House Merimydion. Four years ago, Calivan assured me that a Season of Summerlea was that best union. Now, you come to me saying a Season of Summerlea will not suit and that we must rob House Sami of their long-awaited joy and force my son to wait five more years until Nyree Calagi's daughter is of age to marry?"

The high priest spread his hands. "*Moa Myerial*, please . . ."

Alysaldria's golden eyes flashed with temper. "Are you so afraid that this Season will bear a daughter for House Merimydion? Or is it that you think me incapable of ensuring that a daughter of House Merimydion will be born a true *imlani* capable of ruling from the Sea Throne? You suggest I am too weak to make it so?"

The minister and the high priest both flinched.

“We have heard enough.” The *Myerial* stood before her throne, her eyes glowing like golden suns. She didn’t often speak from the Sea Throne, using the royal “We,” but when she did, it meant she was speaking as the Power of Calberna and that her decision was irrevocable. Recognizing the command for what it was, Calivan, Dilys, the *Donimari*, and the others all dropped to one knee and bowed their heads in submission, keeping their gazes fixed on the floor.

“Ministers, *Donimari*, We thank you for your concerns and your efforts to do what you believe to be in the best interests of Calberna. But We will not ask House Sami or House Calagi to break a contract signed in blood and salt. Nor will We deprive Our son, the *Myerielua*, his right to seek without further delay the happiness and peace he so richly deserves. And should Numahao grace his union with an *imlani* daughter for House Merimyrdion, she will be born with gifts great enough to honor the Sea Throne upon which she will sit, even if We must give Our own life to make it so. So We have spoken. So shall Our will be done.”

The gathered courtiers murmured in unison, “So You have spoken. So shall Your will be done.”

“You are dismissed.”

The group rose and backed out of the room, bowing as they went.

When they were gone, and the throne-room doors closed behind them, Calivan turned to his sister. “Alys, what have you done?”

She rubbed her temples wearily. “I did what had to be done. I cut the legs out from under the Pureblood Alliance and ensured that my son can leave war behind him and finally claim the peace he has earned many times over.”

“But to vow the sacrifice of your own life—from the Sea Throne, you swore it.” Calivan’s horror was clear. Every *imlani* child—especially every daughter—was born with seagifts because both the *Donima* of their House and their closest female *imlani* relatives passed on a measure of their own gifts before that child was born. But the great power stored in Calberna’s native-born women was not limitless. An *imlani* female could drain herself unto death, just as the *Myerials* did on their deathbeds as they passed their power on to their successors. And Alysaldria had just sworn an unbreakable vow to do just that, if she could not gift Dilys’s half-blood daughter with sufficient power any other way.

“*Nima . . .*” Dilys was as horrified as his uncle. “*Nima*, you cannot do this. I won’t allow it. I will accept the betrothal to Coralee Calagi. I will wait ten years or twenty if I must.”

“It is too late for that, *moa elua*. I have Spoken.”

“Then I will not wed. I will live as Calivan does, bound to you and no other.”

Her head jerked up. Blazing eyes met and held his. “You will do no such thing. I will see you wed and settled before this year is out. I will see my son—my only child—made happy.”

“How can I ever be happy to wed an *oulani* if the price for that choice is your death?”

She made a sound of disgust and flung herself to her feet. “How? The same way I have found happiness without your father. Because you must. Because duty to House Merimyrdion and to Calberna means that you and I both must always find a way to be strong for others, even when we cannot be strong for ourselves.” Then her expression softened. “Dilys, *moa elua*, tomorrow you will sail to the *Æsir Isles*, and you will bring home

a daughter for House Merimydon, a daughter to fill my soul with joy and gladness, a *liana* you will love with your whole heart. And she will bear sons and, Numahao willing, a daughter for our House and for Calberna. And your children will be fine, gifted Calbernans who will bring honor to our House, and our country, and our people. So I have Spoken. So shall my will be done.”

Tears filled his eyes. He blinked them back with effort. His voice was choked as he bowed his head in submission and said, “*Tey, moa Myerial.*”

“Good. Then come here and kneel before me, my son. I will give you my blessing now, rather than tomorrow.”

He ascended the coral steps and knelt before Calberna’s pearl-encrusted throne. His mother leaned forward to cup his face with both hands. “My strong, brave, beautiful son,” she said. There was a tremor in her hands that made him frown, but before he could remark on it, her large, heavily golden eyes flashed sun bright.

His body jerked. Power raged through him like a hurricane. The golden trident birthmark on the inside of his left wrist burned and throbbed, glowing the same yellow gold now blazing from his mother’s eyes.

“Let my love bring you strength that you may conquer whatever challenges come your way,” she whispered, and then she placed a kiss on his *ulumilia*, the iridescent blue tattoo that curled from the corner of his right eye across the ridge of his cheekbone.

His eyes rolled back. His muscles locked, else the energy that shuddered mercilessly through his body would have felled him. When she released him, he collapsed before her in dazed breathlessness. His lungs heaved and his racing heart stuttered in his chest.

She guided his head to her lap with one hand, and he laid his head upon her knees in a gesture of love and devoted submission, an acknowledgment that for all his dominance on the seas, his victorious ferocity in battle, and his intimidating height and build, he derived his true strength and greatest magic from this small, slender woman who had borne him. She loved and ruled him as ferociously as she loved and ruled her nation. And like every devoted son of Calberna, he just as ferociously loved, served, and defended her.

Dilys closed his eyes as his mother gently stroked the soft, obsidian ropes of his hair. The power she’d poured into him raged like a tempest inside him, filling his body so completely, his skin felt stretched and on fire. He fought to assimilate that power, to contain it and store it in his cells, to be called upon in future.

Gradually, his thundering pulse slowed and his breathing returned to a calm, unhurried rhythm. Alysaldria gave his locks one last maternal stroke, then released him.

He rose on trembling legs, humbled by his mother’s tremendous gift. “*Moa nana, Nima.*” My thanks, Mother. “But you should not have given me so much.”

Her eyes still shone pure molten gold, but she looked weary and drained. Pale beneath the deep bronze of her skin.

He was about to express his concern when Alysaldria’s eyes rolled back and she collapsed into the cradle of her throne.

“*Nima!*” Dilys lunged for her, catching her slight, slender body and lifting her out of the throne. “Uncle Calivan!”

“Get the healer!” Calivan snapped to one of the guards standing by the throne room. “Dilys, this way. To the antechamber.” Swiftly, his face etched with concern, Calivan led

the way down the stairs behind the throne to the antechamber below. “Put her on that chaise.” He pointed to the long, cushioned lounge set against the wall of the private chamber beneath the throne room and went to fetch a cool cloth and a glass of chilled, salted water while Dilys set his mother down.

She had already come around by the time Calivan returned with the cloth and the water. She waved off their hovering concern, though she accepted both the drink and the damp cloth. “It’s all right. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” Dilys argued. “You fainted.”

“And it’s my own fault,” she said. “Calivan has been telling me I’m not eating properly. I suppose I should have listened to him.”

Dilys cast a concerned look at his uncle, who snapped his fingers at one of the guards who’d followed them down to the antechamber and ordered, “Have the kitchens send up something for the *Myerial* to eat. Immediately. Tell them to send whatever they have on hand. No delays. They can make something more substantial for her later.”

“Tey, Lord Merimydon.” The guard bowed and hurried out.

Dilys turned back to his mother. She struggled to sit up, only to collapse weakly back against the chaise. A cold hand of fear squeezed Dilys’s heart.

“*Nima*, it is more than not eating. You are not well.” Her paleness today. That tremble in her hand before she’d given him her blessing. She was beginning to Fade, that loss of strength that befell some Calbernans, particularly after great tragedy or heartache, when their sorrow became too great to bear. To Calbernans, love and happiness were not simply emotions. They were as essential as air and water. A Calbernan could not live without them.

“*Nima*, you cannot ask me to leave you now. I won’t do it. I won’t go.” He would devote himself to her entirely, pour upon her all the love in his soul to keep her strong. He would do whatever it took, no matter the cost to himself.

“Tey, you will.” She shook her head. “I will allow no further delay. You will travel to the winter lands and you will bring back a daughter for me to love, a daughter to mother my grandchildren. I will hold your child in my arms.”

And suddenly her decision to Speak from the Sea Throne made perfect sense. No wonder she had sworn an unbreakable vow to give her life to make his daughter strong. No wonder she’d commanded him to sail tomorrow to Wintercraig and claim his wife. She’d known she was beginning to Fade.

“Then I will stay, Alys,” Calivan said, reaching down to stroke his sister’s hair.

She grasped his wrist and shook her head again. “*Ono*. You and I have already discussed this. There is no one I trust more to protect my son’s back amongst the *oulani* than you.”

“*Nima*—”

“Alys—”

Dilys and Calivan protested in unison, but Alysaldria would not be swayed.

“*Ono*. Dilys, you will go tomorrow, as planned—with your uncle and with no more fighting between you. You will court this Season your uncle and the Council have chosen for you and you will win her love. Then you will bring her home to Calberna and give her

children to bring you both as much joy and pride as you have brought me. That is what will make me happy. That is what I need from you.”

“*Nima.*” His throat was so tight his voice came out hoarse. He took her hand, pressed his lips to her palm. “As you require, so I shall provide, *moa nima.*”

The sun was still low on the eastern horizon the next morning as Dilys headed to the palace docks, where a glossy blue canal boat was waiting to take him to his ship. He and his Uncle Calivan had shamelessly browbeat his mother last night until she had agreed to let her twin stay with her until she was stronger. Dilys would go on ahead, to begin his courtship of the Seasons, and Calivan would join him in a month or so, once Alysaldria had regained a measure of her strength.

As Dilys reached the perimeter of the palace gardens, a Calbernan stepped out from behind one of the manicured hedges.

“So, you’re off to claim your *oulani.*”

Dilys’s body tensed. His mood—already troubled—grew darker, and he turned slowly to face his cousin Nemuan, the son of the previous *Myerial*.

Tattoos covered Nemuan’s body from neck to toe, with hardly an inch of unadorned bronze skin showing anywhere between, but unlike most Calbernans, whose tattoos were inked with the iridescent blue created from royal anemone, mother of pearl, and crushed silverfish scales, half of Nemuan’s markings had been drawn in matte-black squid ink. Records of all the years he’d spent on the seas, not seeking gold and glory, but absolution for the loss of his sister, Sianna, and his mother, the *Myerial* Siavaluana.

Only two years older than Dilys, Nemuan had been a boy of eleven when the accident had claimed the lives of Sianna and Nyamialine, and ultimately Siavaluana as well. Too young to seek his own death for his family’s honor, but not too young to go to sea. For ten years, he’d sold his sword without profit, facing battle after battle, mission after mission, to prove his strength, his skill, his command of sea and the ships that sailed it. To free himself from the stain of his family’s failure to protect its women. Only after those years had he turned his mind to gold and glory, his desire towards earning a *liana* of his own. Unfortunately for Nemuan, those years of rage and fury had left their mark on more than just his skin. Though he had amassed gold and glory enough for a *liana* of his own, he had yet to claim one.

He was waiting, he said, for a *liana* worthy of the son of a *Myerial*. And just like his cronies in the Pureblood Alliance, Nemuan made it clear he thought Dilys should do the same.

“Nemuan,” Dilys greeted his cousin without enthusiasm. “I thought you were still at sea.”

His cousin smiled, but no humor lightened the flat, dark gold of his eyes. “And miss the day a *Myerial*’s son sails off to fetch an *oulani* bride?”

Dilys’s lips tightened. “What’s done is done, cousin,” he said. “No amount of sacrifice will ever bring your mother, Sianna, or Nyamialine back to us. It is time for you to set aside your fury and your grief. Claim a *liana* of your own to give you children. Seek what happiness this life yet holds for you.”

“I do not forget so easily as you,” Nemuan spat.

Dilys's lips tightened. "I forget nothing. But I cannot change what was, only what will be. And I choose life, for me and the children my *liana* will bear me."

"A *Myerialua* worthy of the name would say it was better to see House Merimyrdion die than sully Calberna's royal line with *oulani* blood. In Numahao's name, Merimyrdion, act like the Prince of the Isles you're supposed to be, not some spineless, self-serving weakling without the will to do what's right."

Dilys's eyes narrowed. The points of his battle claws pressed against his fingertips, wanting out. "Careful, Merimynos."

"You were given the chance to choose what was best for Calberna—to keep the bloodline of the Sirens pure. And you turned your nose up at it."

"I was offered the chance to wait five years before wedding a girl grieving for her lost love. I chose instead to seek a powerful daughter for House Merimyrdion, a daughter for my *nima* to love, one whose heart is not drowning in grief."

"A choice that's good for you and no one else."

"The *Myerial* does not agree."

"The *Myerial* is—"

"*Mua!*" Silence! Dilys's hand slashed through the air. His expression went hard as stone. "Your insults to me, I can let pass, but do not speak words about my mother that I will be forced to make you regret."

Nemuan's lips curled. "As if you could."

A split second later, Nemuan lay flat on his back, Dilys's hand at his throat. The face of the former *Myerial*'s son was turning a satisfying shade of puce.

"I could," Dilys said. "I could very easily. And you'd do best to remember it, *pulan*." His mother had given him more than a little power. She'd all but drained herself for him, making him more than a match for his motherless, sisterless cousin.

Dilys released Nemuan and rose in one swift, smooth motion. Leaving his cousin lying there, Dilys crossed the coral slab of the dock and stepped aboard the glossy blue canal boat. "Don't bother coming to see me off," he said.

At the back of the boat, two Calbernans shoved long poles into the clear water of the canal, pushing away from the courtyard dock. As the boat moved down the canal towards the harbor, Dilys could feel Nemuan's narrowed black eyes boring into the back of his head. The two of them had never been particularly friendly—not at all since the deaths of Sianna and Nyamialine—but their shared blood had always kept them civil. Clearly, those bonds held no longer.

Dilys knew that in Nemuan, he now had an enemy.

## Chapter 2

*Konumarr, Wintercraig*

"Calbernans, who claim to be the favored race of the goddess Numahao, all possess seagifts that enable them to manipulate currents, commune with creatures of the sea, and swim without needing to surface for air. They are rightly called Sealords, as the oceans of the world obey their commands." The golden-skinned boy standing at the head of the small

schoolroom gripped the edges of the leather-bound book in his hands and turned expectant eyes towards his teacher.

“That was excellent, Jori.” Gabriella Coruscate, the Summerlea princess known more commonly by her giftname Summer, smiled at the young boy and took the book from his hands.

The seven-year-old beamed proudly. “I been practicing wit Mam.”

“You have been practicing with your mam,” she corrected kindly, “and, yes, I can see that you have. You’ve made excellent progress, Jori.” The boy’s cheeks flushed a sweet, red rose beneath his golden skin, making the smattering of white freckles across his cheeks glow like stars. He looked so earnest and adorable, with his big blue eyes and the sheafs of straight white hair slanting across his brow, and so proud, too—his spine straight, his narrow shoulders squared beneath his threadbare but pristinely washed, starched, and neatly mended shirt—nothing like the timid, painfully shy child who’d first stepped into her classroom two weeks ago. Unable to stop herself, she reached out to ruffle his hair, and was rewarded with another beaming smile and a palpable pulse of joy that suffused her with soothing warmth.

Summer let herself bask in that warmth for a moment, then stepped back from the lure of Jori’s affection and turned to return the book to the neatly ordered bookshelf standing against the wall.

“All right, class. That’s all for today. There will be no school tomorrow so everyone can attend the welcoming celebrations for the Calbernans. So, I’ll see you again next Modinsday, when we’ll start the next chapter in Tanturri’s History of the World.”

She laughed at the chorus of groans from the students. They much preferred reading adventures and heroic epics like Roland Triumphant: Hero of Summerlea or The Great Hunt—a predilection shared by Summer’s sister Khamsin, the Queen of Wintercraig, who had founded Konumarr’s new public school—but while those texts made for an exciting read, they didn’t expand students’ knowledge of geography and history beyond the shores of the Æsir Isles. Khamsin was determined that the graduates of her experimental new public school should emerge with the ability to read, write, do arithmetic, and have a useful foundation of knowledge in history, geography, and commerce, which is why she’d pressed her sister Summer into teaching this first semester. Children naturally flocked to Summer—and what parent would refuse to let their child attend a class taught by the most beloved princess in the Æsir Isles?

Summer wasn’t entirely convinced that these children—many of whom would go on to join their parents in farming, fishing, sheep herding, or trapping—needed an education that went beyond basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, but Khamsin insisted. Who knew? Maybe she was right. Summer’s own tutor had been fond of history, proclaiming, “A wise man learns from those who came before so that he may duplicate their successes while avoiding their mistakes.” Even if the children never needed to know why long-dead kings had plunged their nations into war or how the battles had affected the world, the part about avoiding the mistakes of one’s forebears was probably a lesson worth learning.

Certainly, it was a lesson Summer had taken to heart.

In any event, Tanturri’s History was the students’ least favorite text. Summer secretly agreed with them—she’d always found it a dead, dry read—but since Wintercraig’s queen

had included it in the curriculum, Summer would plow through it all the same. Hopefully, she'd found a way to make the material more interesting, both for her own sake as well as the students'.

"Lily"—she nodded towards the pregnant young woman at the back of the class—"suggested you might enjoy Tantarri more if we made costumes and acted out some of the historical events. What do you think of that?" When a small chorus of cheers replaced the groans, she smiled. "Excellent. Costumes it is. We'll plan our costumes for the first chapter and go to the store on Turinsday, where you can all practice your arithmetic by deciding how much of each fabric you'll need and how much it will all cost."

She stood by the door as the children filed out, saying good-bye and offering each one a personal word of encouragement for their continued efforts in class. In response to her praise, their joy washed over her like a swell of nourishing warmth. She watched them scatter—some racing home, some racing off to play in one of Konumarr's many parks, the younger ones skipping into their waiting mothers' loving embraces—and forced herself to keep smiling despite the ache of bittersweet longing that burned in her breast.

After they were gone, Summer stood in the schoolhouse doorway, closed her eyes and turned her face up towards the sun, letting the soothing radiance soak into her skin, bringing with it a surge of potent energy that slowly eased the ache in her heart. As a royal princess of Summerlea, she and her sisters all had a particular affinity for the sun—a trait which, as they recently discovered, was owed to the blood of the Sun God, Helos, that ran through their veins.

There was a small sound behind her. "Your idea was a hit," Summer murmured, without opening her eyes.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I hope you know you're going to help me with all the sewing the children don't do themselves—and I have no doubt that will be the bulk of it."

There was a short, uncertain silence, then a small laugh. "Yes, ma'am."

Gabriella turned to smile at Lily, the pretty young Summerlander who'd arrived in Konumarr only a few days after Summer's own arrival two weeks ago. Lily's husband had died in last winter's rebellion, leaving her pregnant and alone. She'd heard about the Calbernans coming to court willing women, so she'd walked and hitched rides from her home in Summerlea's northwestern province, the Orchards, all the way to Konumarr. She'd arrived with a burgeoning belly, no place to stay, and only a scant handful of copper *pisetas* to her name. Khamsin had offered her free room and board at the school in exchange for helping to clean the school and prepare the classrooms each day, but after the second time Gabriella had found Lily standing in the hall outside one of the classroom doors, listening to the lessons, she'd convinced the girl to assist her in the classroom instead.

"You have a good way with children," Summer said. "You're going to be a wonderful mother."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Lily smiled shyly and stroked a hand over her rounded belly. She was a lovely girl, Summerlander dark, with wavy black hair, beautiful dark-chocolate eyes, and deep, lustrous brown skin, but it was the earnest sweetness of her spirit that Summer found her most attractive quality. From Lily's telling reluctance to speak



about her life in Summerlea, the way she jumped at loud noises or sudden movements, and the shadows that sometimes haunted her eyes, Summer gathered the girl had seen more than her share of rough times, but Lily hadn't let those times harden her gentle heart. That took strength. The kind most people missed because it was so subtle.

Abruptly Lily flinched, gave a muffled grunt, and clapped one hand to her right side. "Ow. Little sprout here has quite a kick." She laughed and patted a spot on her belly that was visibly moving as the child in her womb stretched and turned inside her.

Summer's gaze fixed on that movement and the ache in her heart surged back to excruciating life, and with it came a trembling deep inside and a feeling of terrible pressure, like the rumbling of a volcano preparing to erupt.

She turned abruptly away to pluck her shawl from the peg by the door. "I should go," she said. "My family will be waiting tea for me. I'll come in on Helosday and we can review your plans for the children's costumes." Not waiting for a response and without risking another glance in Lily's direction, she headed for the door. "Enjoy your weekend, Lily."

What was happening to her?

Summer took deep breaths as she walked briskly through the streets of Konumarr, heading for the bridge that crossed the wide, deep Llaskroner Fjord to connect the city to the palace on the fjord's northern shores. Ever since coming here three weeks ago, the wall of calm, serene control she'd spent a lifetime building around her magic had been crumbling. And not just with small, minor cracks either, although that would be bad enough. No, the foundation of her self-control, her ability to sublimate her own desires, had suffered a major seismic shift.

Was her father's legacy of madness finally starting to manifest in her?

Gabriella was terrified that was the case, and even more terrified of what she might do to the people around her if it was. What she might do to the people she loved.

She knew everyone thought she was the weakest of the Seasons. She knew everyone thought she was so sweet and kind and gentle that she would never hurt a fly. That's what they were supposed to think. That was the face her mother, the late Queen Rosalind, had taught her to show to the world, the mask she'd taught Gabriella to wear so well it had become second nature to her.

Even now, though her mother was long dead—nearly two decades dead—Summer could still hear her voice, so gentle and yet so firm, pulsing with a magic that Queen Rosalind's Seahaven ancestors had long ago labeled Persuasion.

*"You were born with great power, my darling. Not just from your father but from me as well. You must learn to control it. If you don't, you could hurt a great many people, and I know you would never want that. You must control it, Gabriella. You must. Your father and I will help you any way we can. But to start with, you must learn to always remain calm. Stay away from people and situations that upset you. Practice sending goodness, kindness, and happiness out into the world, so that you only get goodness, kindness, and happiness back."*

And that was exactly what she'd done. She'd avoided conflict entirely at first. Anger, hatred, violence: those emotions stung her senses like nettles, feeding darkness into her until her own darkness roared in response. As she got older, she'd eventually learned how to defuse conflict rather than run from it. She'd mastered the Persuasive gifts she'd

inherited from her mother and her Seahaven ancestors, though she was always careful not to “push” too hard with those gifts, for fear of unleashing her other, more dangerous magic.

She’d thought she’d succeeded in caging her deadliest gifts and escaping the madness that had consumed and destroyed her father, but since coming to Konumarr, her hard-won and painstakingly maintained serenity had all but evaporated. The beast that dwelt inside her had begun rousing at the simplest provocation.

It didn’t even take anger or violence to shake the foundations of her control anymore. All it took was for her to want something, badly, and that hungry, wild, ferocious thing inside her roared to life, ripping and tearing at her control, threatening to break free.

Like seeing Lily’s baby move and desiring—needing! Yearning! WANTING!—a baby of her own to love, even though that was the last thing she should ever have.

She’d reached Ragnar Square, the central plaza of Konumarr. Two dozen villagers were hard at work, twining blossoming vines around lampposts and stringing cables for the lanterns that would be lit tomorrow night for the celebration welcoming the Calbernans to Wintercraig. Several of the workers saw her and paused in their work to doff hats and bow or curtsy.

“Your Royal Highness.”

Gabriella forced a smile, somehow managing to summon the Sweet Princess Summer mask they all expected to see. “Please, that’s not necessary. Don’t let me interrupt your work.” Unbidden, a strong thrust of Persuasion pushed out along with her words. The workers—all of them—immediately went back to their tasks as if she wasn’t even there.

Rattled by her unintentional use of power, Summer tucked her chin down and hurried past. This wouldn’t do. This wouldn’t do at all!

She didn’t dare return to the palace just yet. She needed peace and quiet and a place to center herself, to shore up the crumbling foundation of her control. Rather than turning to cross the bridge leading to the palace, she continued walking briskly down the Konumarr’s main road. She wanted to break out into a run, but that would draw attention to herself. Attention meant people would be bombarding her senses with their curiosity and alarm, and she wasn’t prepared to risk any further damage to the barriers that kept her magic in check.

Just before the city gates, Gabriella turned left down a stone-paved path that led to her favorite place in Konumarr: a small, mossy grotto tucked away behind the misting waters of Snowbeard Falls. There the air was cool and damp, and the roar of the falls drowned out all noise from the city. It was the one place in all of Konumarr where she could feel well and truly alone—alone enough to find the peace she so desperately needed.

Gabriella sat down on the stone bench in the center of the grotto and closed her eyes as the misty spray from the foaming white veil of falling water dampened her face. The chilly moisture evaporated quickly on her hot cheeks, but she gripped the sides of the stone bench with both hands and remained where she was until the speed with which the water evaporated slowed down to something approaching normal. Only then did she open her eyes, and with hands that shook only slightly, she unclasped the charm bracelet secured around her right wrist and held it in her palm.

Small jeweled charms dangling from the bracelet's silver links winked up at her, each tiny shell, starfish, and sea creature paved with a different colored gemstone.

*"Your mother would have wanted you to have this."* She could still hear her father's voice, before the madness had him fully in its grip, before she and her other sisters knew their beloved father had become a monster. He'd given Gabriella her mother's bracelet on her eighth birthday, less than a year after her mother's death. *"You're so like her."* She remembered the feel of Papa's big, broad hands petting her black curls back off her face. *"Like a little piece of my Rose, still alive for me to love."*

Summer gave a stifled sob and pushed away those memories, reaching instead for the memory of her mother unclasping her bracelet and putting it in Gabriella's small hands, teaching her how to find the calm within. *"Pick a charm, darling. Any one of them. How about this little blue dolphin here? Such a happy fellow, don't you think? This one was always my favorite. Now, I want you to focus on it. Focus on this little blue dolphin."*

In a ritual that she'd done so often it had become instinct, Gabriella poked through the charms with one finger until she found the small sapphire-studded dolphin. Pinching that charm between her thumb and forefinger, she focused intently on the blue glitter of its gems.

*"Imagine him swimming in the ocean, laughing and leaping in the waves. Good, that's good, baby girl. Now keep imagining that happy dolphin until everything that makes you angry or upset fades away. There's my girl. There's my sweet, kind, good, beautiful girl. I love you, Gabriella. I love you so very, very much."*

The little blue dolphin charm grew blurry. Gabriella blinked and wetness much warmer than the mist from the falls trickled down her cheeks.

"Oh, Mama," she whispered. "Oh, Mama, I miss you so much."

"You're late," Gabriella's eldest sister, Viviana, better known by her giftname, Spring, greeted her as she stepped out onto Konumarr Palace's western terrace. Spring frowned, her bright green gaze sweeping over Gabriella intently, missing nothing. "Is everything all right?"

Her mother's bracelet clasped back in place around her wrist, the fractures in the fortress containing her power once more tightly sealed, Gabriella summoned a blithe, sunny smile and, with the ease of a lifetime of practice, chose a lie she knew her sisters would believe. "Of course. Everything's fine. It was just such a beautiful day, I just had to take a little detour on the way home. I didn't think you'd mind."

King Wynter, Summer's brother-in-law, had promised her and her sisters that come spring his country would transform into one of the most beautiful places on earth, and he had not been wrong. With the long, bright days of northern Wintercraig's summer well underway, the ice and snow of winter had retreated, leaving picturesque waterfalls pouring down from the mountainsides, creating perpetual rainbows in the mists. Konumarr, built at the headwaters of the Lkaskroner Fjord valley, was nestled in the very heart of that beauty, surrounded by green cliffs, lush forests, and abundantly blooming life. In certain parts of the city, you could even glimpse the glacier-capped peaks of the Skoerr Mountains to the north.

“Well, I don’t mind,” Spring said, “but a few more minutes, and I feared Autumn might start gnawing on her own arm.”

“Not my arm, Vivi,” retorted Autumn, the youngest and most beautiful of the three princesses known as the Seasons of Summerlea. “I was thinking about gnawing on yours.” With a laugh and a toss of her bright auburn curls, Autumn stuck out her tongue and headed for the wide table where a full afternoon tea had been laid out for them.

As usual, the palace staff had outdone themselves. Tiered plates of sandwiches, savories, delicate iced cakes, and a variety of other sweets had been tucked amidst artfully arranged flowers and greenery, giving the impression of nature offering up a bounty of delectable treats. Autumn snatched up a plate and began to help herself to the goodies.

Gabriella glanced around the terrace, but apart from two guards and a servant standing off at a discreet distance, the three Seasons were alone. “Where are Storm and Wynter? I thought they were joining us.”

“Khamsin took ill again right after lunch.”

“Ah. Poor thing.” Their youngest sister, Khamsin, hadn’t had the most uneventful pregnancy, that was for sure. Even eight months into it, bouts of queasiness would still take her unawares at any time of day or night, a fact that had left her husband, Wynter, hovering over his beloved wife until she threatened to shoot a lightning bolt up his unmentionables if he didn’t leave her in peace. “I hope Tildy brewed up something to help her feel better.”

“She did, and it must have worked. We haven’t seen Kham or Wynter for almost two hours.” Spring winked and they both laughed. “So how was school today?” Spring asked. “Did the little sprouts learn heaps and heaps?”

“Heaps and heaps,” Summer confirmed. She glanced past Spring to the tea table and tried to hide a smile as she watched Autumn pile her plate high with three savory meat pies, eight tiny sandwiches, four small iced cakes layered with fruit filling, and two small pastry cornucopias filled with sugared fruits.

Seeing the smile, Spring turned, then scowled. “Sweet Halla, Autumn! Could you leave some for everyone else?”

Autumn arched a haughty auburn brow and sniffed. “Oh, hush. There’s enough here to feed an army. No one’s going to be shorted because I chose to indulge myself. Which I’m going to do more of, now, just to irritate you.” Blowing Spring a kiss, she added another meat pie and three large sugar cookies frosted with cream-cheese icing to the tottering pile on her plate. “So there.”

Spring scowled. “You are incorrigible.”

Autumn popped a tiny iced teacake in her mouth, grinned, and executed a wildly extravagant bow, complete with waving flourishes of her free arm. It was a credit to Autumn’s natural grace that not a single item toppled from her teetering, overfull plate.

For the first time since her earlier lapse in control, Gabriella’s fear evaporated completely, and genuine laughter bubbled up inside her over Autumn’s antics. She tried to stifle a giggle because she knew Spring wouldn’t approve, but succeeded only in giving an unladylike snort of amusement. That earned her a grin from Autumn and a dark look from Spring.

“Honestly, Gabi, must you encourage her?”

Gabrielle's smothered giggle turned into an outright laugh. "I can't help it. She's funny."

"She's ridiculous." Spring planted her hands on her slender hips. Her spine was rigid, her green eyes snapping. The long sheath of stick-straight black hair that fell to her hips didn't so much as twitch. "I hope you will be better behaved tomorrow with the Calbernans, Aleta Seraphina Helena Rosalie Violet Coruscate."

Autumn rolled her eyes, plopped into a chair at the table, then attacked her food with the ferocious focus of a general commanding the invasion of a small country.

"She's nervous about tomorrow," Summer murmured as she and Spring turned back to the tea table to fill their own plates with less than a fourth of what Autumn had taken. "You know how she gets when she's nervous."

Even on a normal day, most people who saw the amount of food Autumn put away were shocked, and when she was nervous, she ate at least twice what she usually did. By all rights, the sheer quantity of what she consumed should have left her as fat as a farmer's prize porker, but instead she maintained a perfect figure, slender of waist and limb but generously curved in all the right places. There was something about holding the sun in your soul that tended to burn calories like kindling.

Still, if Summer ate the way Autumn did, her curves would be so generous they'd be popping the seams on all her clothes!

"I'm nervous, too," Spring muttered, "but you don't see me trying to stuff the whole palace larder down my gullet!"

"No," Gabriella agreed. "But I do I see you trying to control something you know you can't. And maybe obsessing just a little? How many more times did you read that report on the Calbernans last night?"

Spring flushed. "Summer the Sweet, sometimes you're a little tart."

Proving she was still listening even from her spot at the table, Autumn turned in her chair to crow, "Viv! You made a pun!" She gave Spring two thumbs up. "I'm so proud of you!"

Spring rolled her eyes. Gabriella smothered a laugh, then said, "And since you didn't answer my question, I take it to mean you read the report at least—what?—two more times?"

"Four," Spring admitted grudgingly, "but only because I couldn't sleep!" They returned to the table and took their seats next to Autumn. "Of course, as usual, Gabriella, you don't look even the slightest bit nervous about tomorrow."

"Why would I be?" Gabriella reached for the silver teapot. "It's not like Sealord Merimyrdion is going to be paying me much attention when you and Autumn are there."

"Gabriella . . ."

Summer laughed with genuine amusement. "It's true and you know it. And I honestly don't mind. Quite the opposite, in fact. I don't have to worry about whether I'm making a good impression, or twist myself in knots when my potential husband turns out to be a loathsome toad or an intolerable gas bag. Instead, I get to just sit back and enjoy the show."

That comment pulled Autumn away from her food. "Hah," she said. "You weren't enjoying the show last week with that Vermese ambassador. He really took a shine to you. All the Vermese do. They think you're their type. All soft and sweet and accommodating."

Summer blinked big, innocent blue eyes and gave her sister a beatific smile. “I am soft and sweet and accommodating.”

Autumn laughed. “And sneaky. And stubborn. And subversive.”

“Don’t be unkind, Leta,” Summer chided. But she couldn’t stop the tiny smile that curled up the corners of her lips. Her sisters knew her better than anyone. They knew about the masks she showed the world. What they didn’t know was how often the face she showed them was a mask as well.

Her smile dimmed a little at that thought, and to hide it she reached for the large silver teapot set out in the center of the table. Hefting the pot, she poured a stream of hot honeyrose tea into a crystal tea glass cradled in a beautifully carved silver holder. After adding two small flower-shaped cubes of sugar from the bowl, she handed the glass to Spring along with a tiny silver spoon.

“Speaking of the Vermese,” Spring said. “I want to apologize again for abandoning you the way I did. I shouldn’t have left you to cozy up to that cretin all on your own.”

“As I’ve said before, there’s no need to apologize. Cozying up to cretins is my specialty.” Like her mother before her, Summer was considered the palace peacemaker. It was a role that usually suited her quite well. Gabriella sighed. “Unfortunately, that time, I don’t think it did much good.”

Two weeks ago, an apoplectic Galil beda Turat, ambassador to Maak Korin beda Khan, Mystral’s wealthiest and most powerful emperor, had stormed out of Konumarr Palace, furious that the Great Maak’s tenth marriage proposal since Autumn’s thirteenth birthday had been refused. Only unlike the many times their father had refused the Maak’s offers, Wynter had not only refused, he’d done so in a way that made it clear no future offers from the Great Maak would ever be welcome.

Gabriella had done her best to calm down the outraged ambassador, finally resorting to a push of Persuasion. His reaction still troubled her. The ambassador hadn’t merely been outraged, he’d been afraid. One thing she’d learned over the years was that frightened, furious men could end up causing all sorts of trouble. And even though the ambassador was no threat, the same couldn’t be said for his master, Maak Korin beda Khan.

“You did more good than I would have done,” Spring said. “If I had to bite my lip one more time so as not to offend him with my bold, unfeminine ways I would have wrapped my hands around his skinny neck and strangled the life out of him. But that’s still no excuse for leaving you to face him all on your own. I know the Vermese make your skin crawl.”

Like she was buried in spiders, cockroaches, and every other manner of creepy-crawly, but all Gabriella said—mildly—was, “They are among the few visitors we’ve received over the years that I’ve never been able to make myself like.”

“Can you imagine if one of the Verminous Vermese took Summer as a wife?” Autumn interjected. “He wouldn’t know what hit him. Within the year, she’d probably have Verma turned into the next Calberna!” She laughed.

Summer repressed a shudder at the thought of being married—or rather, enslaved—to a Vermese man. “Some things are beyond even my powers of Persuasion.” And what she might do to the Vermese, were she ever put under their control, would be neither as

amusing nor as nonviolent as what Autumn had suggested. Suppressing another, deeper shudder, Gabriella reached for a fresh tea glass and poured a cup for herself.

No one—not even her beloved sisters—knew the true extent of Gabriella’s magical gifts. They didn’t even know about the magical gift for mind control that she’d inherited from her mother and their Seahaven relatives. They simply thought that she—like their mother before her—was so naturally kind and charming she could soften even the hardest heart.

“Thankfully,” Spring said as Summer prepared her tea, “I doubt any of us need ever fear being married off to a Vermese. After the manner in which Wynter refused the Maak’s latest offer, I feel safe to say that particular door has not only been closed, it’s been welded permanently shut.”

“Thank holy Halla, home of all good gods,” Autumn said with heartfelt sincerity. Widely acclaimed as one of the most beautiful women in Mystral, with her dark Summerlander skin, pansy purple eyes, and rich, auburn hair, Autumn had been the object of the Vermese emperor’s relentless marital pursuit since the day she turned thirteen. “Given the price Maak Korin offered this time, I thought I was doomed for sure.”

“Wynter wouldn’t do that to you,” Summer said.

“Wynter is a king,” Spring said. “Kings do that sort of thing all the time.”

As princesses of Summerlea, now wards of Wintercraig, the three of them had always known their fate was to be married for the advantage of their monarch. In Summerlea as in Verma and Cho, men still ruled—both the kingdom and their families—although Summerlanders at least considered women to be people, not property. Here in Wintercraig, society was even more egalitarian on the gender front. The harsh conditions bred not just physical hardiness but fierce independence. A woman who had to chop wood, tend her farm, and keep her family and livestock safe from hungry predators while her husband was out hunting and trapping didn’t take kindly to being bossed around by anyone. But just because Wintercraig women were independent didn’t mean kings cast aside the rights of their rule.

“Not this king,” Summer said staunchly, then ruined her show of unwavering support by adding, “Khamsin wouldn’t let him.”

Autumn grinned. “True,” she agreed. “The Winter King has well and truly melted. And a year ago, who’d have believed we’d be saying that?”

The three of them laughed in shared delight. One of the most astonishing—and endlessly entertaining—aspects of living here in Wintercraig these last months was the opportunity to watch the fierce and fearsome Wynter of the Craig, terrifying Bogeyman from the north and conqueror of Summerlea, dote on their youngest sister. Khamsin didn’t exactly have him wrapped around her finger—Wynter was too much his own man for that—but there wasn’t much she truly wanted that he wouldn’t move Halla and Mystral to provide for her.

“Be that as it may,” Spring interrupted, “the fact remains the three of us are going to have to marry someone. And Wynter, no matter how much he dotes on Khamsin, is going to make sure that someone will benefit Wintercraig. So, which of us is going to take the pirate?”

“Sealord Merimydon isn’t a pirate,” Summer said.

“He’s a mercenary who sails the sea, selling his services to the highest bidder,” Spring countered. “That’s close enough to a pirate for me.” Setting her tea aside, she leaned back in her chair to regard her sisters. “Still, I suppose even a pirate is a better potential husband than a Vermese.”

“Who wouldn’t be?” Autumn muttered.

“Sealord,” Gabriella corrected. “They call themselves Sealords.”

Spring leveled a cool, grass-green stare Summer’s way. Not quite a glare, but close. A definite warning. Spring wasn’t as volatile as their sister Storm, but she she could work up a decent tempest when it suited her, and it looked like it was about to suit her.

Considering Summer’s earlier lapse in control, the last thing she needed was to have Spring’s temper tearing at the mental walls she’d just repaired.

“Here, have a little mint in your tea.” Gabriella crushed a sprig and leaned over to drop the fragrant leaves in Spring’s tea glass. “It’s very soothing for when you’re out of sorts.”

“I’m not out of sorts,” Spring snapped. Then she realized the tea in her glass was starting to boil, and she grimaced. “Or maybe I am. Sorry. Entertaining that Vermese ambassador for three days put me on edge, and now we have to spend three months entertaining the pira—the Sealord.”

“Well, Storm promises he’s very engaging, at least,” Autumn said. “And handsome. Nothing like that dreadful Prince Rampion Papa was courting on our behalf before the war.”

“Prince Rampion was a nice man,” Summer reproved.

“He was a deadly dull, skinny as a stick, and couldn’t dance worth a *piseta*. And he had a big nose and spots.” Autumn grimaced at the memory.

Summer sighed. It was true, Prince Rampion hadn’t been particularly attractive, but there’d been a kindness and vulnerability beneath his stiff pride that garnered her sympathy. “He was very intelligent,” she said. “And he grows roses.”

Spring rolled her eyes. “No wonder you liked him.”

Gabriella smiled. She’d inherited their mother’s looks, her gift for Persuasion, and also her love of flower gardening. Though Spring was, hands down, the best gardener in the family, she preferred turning her gifts in a more practical direction: the cultivation of fruits, vegetables, and grains. “Flowers are all well and good,” she would say, “but they won’t feed a family in winter.” Summer was the one with their mother’s passion for flowers. There was something very soothing about tending flowers on warm summer days, the rich smell of loamy earth, the heady scent of fragrant blooms, a fresh breeze on her face. Gardens were peaceful, and Summer loved them for that.

But Spring was wrong. Summer and Rampion’s shared interest in gardening wasn’t why he had appealed to her. He was, quite simply, a gentle, kind man she absolutely would never fall in love with.

And that had made him perfect husband material in Summer’s opinion.

Unfortunately, Papa had not agreed. Rampion wasn’t rich enough, his father’s kingdom not influential enough. Papa had been determined to wed his three beloved daughters to the wealthiest, most powerful kings on Mystral—and for the best, most advantageous marriage contracts. Oh, he prettied it up, of course, when talking to them. Saying things like, “I only want the best for my daughters,” and that was true enough, else



Autumn's fierce objections wouldn't have stopped him from accepting one of Maak Korin's previous offers.

But Summer had also always known that as much as her father loved his three, beautiful Seasons, in the end, he'd loved power even more. Had their brother Falcon not forged an alliance with the Calbernans two years ago for an army of mercenaries in exchange for the island prince's pick of the Seasons, Autumn would already have become Maak Korin's forty-first wife.

It wasn't that their father had been a bad man—at least, he hadn't started out that way. It was simply that Verdán of Summerlea's truest, deepest, most giving love—and he had once been capable of truly great love—had died with Mama. Then that love had turned to grief, and grief had turned to rage and an insatiable, ravening hunger for power, for wealth, for anything to fill that yawning emptiness once filled by his love for his wife.

Or so Summer had decided this last year as she'd tried to come to terms with the madness that had consumed her father so completely that he'd destroyed his son's life, thrown his kingdom into war, and sought to kill his youngest daughter on multiple occasions—only to lose his own life in her stead on the last attempt.

And as horrible and awful as King Verdán's descent into madness had been, Summer was perhaps the only one of his daughters who truly understood it. Because, despite everyone's belief that Summer was like her mother in all ways, the truth was, she the one most like Papa when it came to how deeply and unreservedly she loved, and how completely those emotions could consume her.

And that was precisely why Summer Coruscate, who longed for a true, deep, passionate love, would never marry any man who could lay the slightest claim on her heart.

She closed her eyes briefly, clamped unyielding chains around the caged monster in her soul, then opened her eyes again and pasted on a pleasant smile.

"I'm sure you'll both find Sealord Merimydon much more to your taste than Prince Rampion," she said. She was pleased that not a hint of her inner struggle showed in her voice or expression. Her meditation in the grotto had done its job.

"That's not saying much," Spring grumped. "I'd find eating ceiling plaster more to my taste than Prince Rampion."

"At least he wasn't Korin beda Khan," Autumn pointed out.

"Point taken." Spring steepled her hands before her. "Now back to the p—Sealord. Reports aside, what do we really know about this Dilys Merimydon?"

"We know that he's wealthy, he's a skilled warrior, he's handsome, charming, and helped save the world from a dread god who would have plunged the whole of Mystral into unending winter," Autumn added. "Not to ruin your determination to find something wrong with him, Viviana, but that last one tells me all I need to know. The man literally helped save the world." She shrugged. "I can spend three months of my time being nice to him for that."

Spring sighed. "Yes, yes, but in the reports I've read, there isn't one bad thing about him listed. Not one, and that's just not normal."

"You're complaining because the reports say Dilys Merimydon is a good man?" Summer shook her head.

“Not just good. Too good. As in too good to be true. I’m just saying, something smells fishy to me.”

Autumn laughed. “You know, there’s a good joke in that remark.”

Spring rolled her eyes. “Don’t. Please. Spare us.” In addition to her addiction to food, Autumn possessed a terrible love for pranks, puns, and bad jokes. Which, of course, she took inordinate glee in inflicting on her family.

Autumn sniffed with mock indignation. “As if I would cast my pearls before swine. What were we talking about again? Oh, yes, Dilys Merimydon. The Scrumptious Sealord.”

“Oh, dear gods,” Spring groaned. “You’ve nicknamed him. Alliteratively.”

“I thought about Delicious Dilys. Or Manly Merimydon. After all, from what Storm said, he’s very easy on the eye. I don’t know about the rest of you, but after ten years of being pursued by the Verminous Vermese, I’m looking forward to being courted by a handsome, young suitor who actually respects women and considers them—gasp!—real human beings. Like men, but without the dangly bits. Shocking, I know, but there you have it.”

Summer couldn’t help it. She started laughing.

Spring glowered. “Stop that! Don’t encourage her!” She turned the glower on Autumn and said, “Aleta Seraphina Helen Rosalie Violet Coruscate, can you please, for one moment, take this seriously?”

“You’re taking it seriously enough for the three of us, dearest Viviana.” Autumn lowered her voice and boomed sternly, “He wants to marry a Season so he must be investigated. Something about him smells fishy.” Cupping a hand over her mouth, she quipped to Summer in a loud aside, “I dunno, do you think maybe it’s—you know—the gills?”

Summer covered her mouth with both hands and spluttered with laughter.

Spring regarded them both with disgust. “Talk about pearls being cast before swine. I’m telling you in all seriousness that I’ve been looking at this from every possible angle and something about this situation just doesn’t add up. The Calbernans made not one but two contracts, risking thousands of his men in war, specifically to claim—or have a chance to claim—a Season for a wife. Why not some other, less costly bride? There are other princesses out there—even some with magic that’s at least on par with ours. Why us?”

“The Maak of Verma and Cho just offered the largest bride price in history to claim Autumn,” Summer pointed out. “Maybe Sealord Merimydon wants the same thing.”

“Perhaps, but if that was the case, don’t you think Khamsin would have told us Autumn was the one he wanted? He’s interested in our weathergifts—Kham said he admitted that—but he didn’t care that they wouldn’t be passed on to our children.” The divine gifts bestowed upon Summerlea’s royal family by the sun god, Helos, never passed out of the immediate royal family. Though Spring, Summer, and Autumn all inherited their gifts from their father, only Khamsin, now the ruling Queen of Summerlea and Wintercraig, would pass on those gifts to her children.

“I think you’re seeing suspicious motives when none exist,” Autumn said. “Calbernans do rule the sea, after all. I assume they want to rule the weather as well for a while. What sailor wouldn’t? Guaranteed clear skies and fair winds? Maybe stir up a few storms to

belabor the competition. Even a single generation of that would give them a considerable advantage.”

Summer reached for a perfectly iced tea cake topped with a sparkling sugar snowflake and took a delicate nibble. The tangy sweetness of the redberry jam filling, sweet almond icing, and delicate lemon cloud cake filled her mouth with delight. “Oh, sweet Halla, that’s good.” She pushed the plate towards Spring. “You really should try one of these tea cakes, Vivi. They’re delicious.”

“Seriously?” Spring regarded her two sisters in disgust. “Aren’t either of you the least bit interested in getting to the real truth about our future bridegroom? I can’t believe you’re both being so cavalier.”

“Not cavalier, Vivi. We’re being sensible,” Autumn replied seriously. “First of all, Sealord Calbernan will be the future bridegroom of only one of us. And second, Storm made it clear that the choice to marry him or not would lie with us—not him. So, he won’t be bridegroom to any of us if we don’t wish it.”

“And third,” Summer added, “it’s a beautiful day in this beautiful city. And for the first time since we got here, we have the whole afternoon to ourselves, without a single Verminous Vermese or Perturbingly Perfect Pirate”—she sent a grin Autumn’s way—“in sight, which means, after I finish tea, I’m going to walk along the banks of the fjord past all those gorgeous waterfalls and just enjoy the day. You should both come with me.”

“Ooh, that sounds delightful,” Autumn said. “Count me in.” They exchanged a smile.

“You two go on without me,” Spring said. “You both might think I’m being ridiculous, but I know there’s more to this than meets the eye and I’m determined to find out what it is. The folk here in Konumarr have traded with the Calbernans for centuries. Maybe there’s someone here who can help shed some light on their motivations.”

“Vivi, you’re starting to obsess,” Gabriella warned. Spring didn’t often get riled up about anything, but when she did, she was like a dog with a bone. She wouldn’t let it go. Dilys Merimydition’s reasons for wanting a Season for a wife had clearly become one of these things. Gabriella wanted to be sure Spring’s worry didn’t progress beyond a healthy concern. Because Summer wasn’t the only one who’d inherited one of their father’s more dangerous traits.

Spring opened her mouth to object, then snapped it closed. After a silent, scowling moment, she plucked two iced tea cakes from Autumn’s plate, popped them into her mouth one after another, then drank down the rest of her mint-infused honeyrose tea.

“You’re right,” she said, setting her empty tea glass on the table, “the cakes are divine, and the mint makes the tea very soothing. I think I’ll join you two for a walk after all.”

The three sisters smiled at each other with shared love and understanding. Daughters of a mad king, they might be, but they had vowed they would always help each other, as they’d not been able to help their father or their brother Falcon.

## Chapter 3

With the sea breeze ruffling his hair, and his ship rocking rhythmically in the warm tropical waters of the Varyan Ocean, Mur Balat, Mystral’s most infamous, feared, and obscenely wealthy slaver, regarded his guest over a steaming cup of star blossom tea.

The tea was steeped from petals and stamen of flowers that bloomed only once every ten years and only in the highest reaches of the Chitzkali Mountains, in the heart of cannibalistic despot Gulah Zin's territory. Prized for both the rarity and difficulty of acquisition of its main component as well as its fabled healing properties, star blossom tea was Mystral's rarest and most expensive beverage, an indulgence that cost a staggering two hundred golden *coronas* per half ounce. But Mur Balat was a man wealthy enough and connected enough to feed such indulgences.

He liked the taste and effects of the tea well enough. But he liked more the message it sent to those with whom he shared it.

Here is a man who can obtain whatever your heart desires, that cup of pricey, pale nectar declared. No matter how rare, no matter how priceless, no matter how difficult to acquire.

Provided, of course, that you could pay his fee.

"Sugar?" he asked politely. Born the bastard son of a Balalatika enchantress and a royal prince of a kingdom that had long since fallen into ruin, Mur Balat prided himself on his good manners. Bastard, thief, slaver, and whoremonger, he might be, but his mother had seen to it that he'd been raised, clothed, and educated as well if not better than his father's legitimate sons. At his father, the prince's expense, of course.

In the years since his mother's death, Balat had come to the conclusion that she truly had loved her handsome, devoted royal prince. If she hadn't, she would never have bothered to murder the prince's wife. And then, she wouldn't have laid such a devastating curse upon her lover and his father's kingdom as she stood on the pyre to be burned for her deed.

Balat's parents were gone. The once thriving kingdom that had been his childhood home was a shattered ruin of its former self, having been torn apart by war and conquest, its indigenous people murdered or enslaved. His mother's brilliant mind and most of her life's work had been destroyed by the king's men when they came for her. Not the most important treasures of the Balalatika bloodline, thank Halla, but her personal spell book, the one she had begun for herself as a young girl. And for what? Love?

Love makes you weak. And foolish. That was the lesson he learned from his mother's death. It was a lesson his current guest had, to Balat's continued enrichment, never learned.

Irritation flashed in Balat's guest's eyes, but was quickly smothered. He leaned forward to pluck two shell-shaped lumps of sugar from the bowl and drop them into his cup, then sat back to stir the tea with a tiny golden spoon. After taking a sip, he said brusquely, "Delicious, as always."

Balat smiled and leaned back in his chair, unoffended by his friend's curt demeanor. Theirs had been a strained friendship for quite a number of years. "It is my pleasure to indulge you, my friend." He made a point of sending his friend a small box of star blossom tea every year. As much a reminder of their past as a reminder of the power Balat held over him.

They'd first met years ago when they'd both traveled Mystral in search of the world's magical secrets. After the fourth time their paths crossed, Balat made a point of befriending his fellow magical scholar. But although he and his friend had kept in contact

over the years—Balat never lost touch with a useful acquaintance—it had been several years since they'd last met face to face. His friend found it difficult to leave home for any length of time.

That was part of the reason Balat had agreed to meet him here, at sea, rather than at Balat's primary home—a mighty fortress built on the cliffs overlooking Trinipor, the bustling slave capital of Mystral. Leaving home for the time necessary to travel to and from Trinipor would have roused too much suspicion for his friend, and given how close Balat was to finally unlocking the greatest magical power in the history of Mystral, this was not the time to invite unnecessary scrutiny.

“So,” Balat prompted, “I take it you have reconsidered my offer?”

“I have. And you've brought what we agreed upon?”

“Of course.” Balat snapped his fingers. A servant hurried forward and, with a deep bow, held out an ornate golden serving tray bearing a pitcher of water, two glasses, and a small box. Balat set the pitcher and both glasses on the table and lifted the lid of the box to reveal a tiny crystal flacon filled with a deep purple liquid.

“You'll find it much more powerful than the batch I brewed up for you before.” Balat unstopped the flacon and poured a single, scant drop of the purple liquid into the pitcher of water, stirring it with a glass rod the servant produced from an apron pocket. “Even this is a much higher concentration than is advisable. To avoid detection, I recommend diluting a single drop in two gallons of water every two or three months and dispensing it no more than a quarter cup at a time. Would you like to sample it yourself?” At his friend's nod, Balat poured two glasses from the pitcher, offering one to his friend and keeping the other for himself. Balat tossed back the contents of his own glass first, knowing his friend would not drink until after he did. He didn't take offense. His friend's suspicious nature was, in part, exactly why Balat liked him so well.

After waiting a few seconds to observe the effect of the drink on Balat, Mur's guest sipped at his own glass experimentally, and his eyes widened.

“That's far more potent than before. This is like drinking youth itself.”

“Yes, I've learned the trick of separating out the toxins so I can distill the potion to a much higher concentration, which greatly amplifies its effect and eliminates the side-effects you worried about before. The potion won't bring the dead back to life, mind, but it does an excellent job of revitalizing whatever absorbs it. Short of drinking from the Fount of Æternis itself, nothing could do more to hold death at bay. This small flacon should supply you for twenty years at least.”

Balat corked the flacon, molded soft gold wax over the stopper to seal it tight, and tucked it back into its box. “As we agreed, I am including the recipe for making more.” He displayed a folded card, the inside of which was scrawled with alchemical notes. After laying the card atop the flacon, he closed and latched the box with a flick of his thumb, then handed it to his friend.

Balat's guest immediately went to open the box, but the instant he touched the latch, bright yellow sparks shot out. Snatching back his smarting hand and shaking it against the shock he'd just received, he favored Balat with a scowl. “A protection spell?”

Balat smiled. His friend wasn't the only one with a suspicious nature. “Simply a bit of insurance. I am giving you the extract as a show of good faith. When I have what you

promised, I'll send you the key to remove the spell. In the meantime, my servant here will bottle up the contents of the pitcher. That should be enough to last the summer."

His friend regarded him with open bitterness. "After all this time, I'm hardly likely to betray you, now am I?"

Mystral's most infamous slaver shrugged and gave another small charming smile. "Caution has always served me well. So, do we have a deal, my friend?"

Calivan Merimydon reached across the table to shake his hand. "We do. Before summer's end, the Seasons of Summerlea will be yours."

An hour after the sails of Calivan Merimydon's ship disappeared over the horizon, a new set of sails appeared, these from a ship approaching from the north. Balat dined on a succulent feast of lobster, saffron rice, grilled vegetables, and glistening fruit as he waited for the ship to draw near.

When it did, an enormous, scary brute leapt aboard and headed straight for the dining table, ignoring Balat's icy disapproval as he plopped down at the table and reached over to snatch a handful of grapes from the serving platter.

"You there." The man known as the Shark, Mystral's most feared pirate, snapped his fingers at one of Balat's servants and pointed to the empty tabletop before him. After a hesitant look to Balat—who nodded—the servant bustled off and returned a few seconds later with a fresh table setting for the pirate. "I received your message. I take it your friend decided to come through for you?"

"He did."

"We could do this without him, you know." As the Shark spoke, a parade of servants came by, offering a wide selection of fine delicacies from the sea and local farms. He helped himself to three large reef lobsters, a salad, spiced cucumbers, roasted taca root, and a bowl of warm, crusty rolls swimming in melted garlic butter. "That spell you taught me has been working well. We can take the Seasons without additional help."

"Perhaps, but I've done the calculations and consulted with my seers. Taking the Seasons without his help adds unnecessary risk. This is too important an opportunity for me to leave anything to chance. I want the Seasons spirited away without the slightest trail leading back to either of us or to any of my clients."

"The Winter King will suspect at least one of your clients. The Maak hasn't exactly been subtle in his pursuit of Autumn Coruscate."

"Suspicion is a far cry from certainty. Without proof, they won't dare start a war with the greatest military power on Mystral. And taking all three Seasons instead of just the one will help allay suspicions that would otherwise go naturally in the Maak's direction."

"And who would be the second person they'd suspect? I'm thinking Mystral's most infamous and influential slaver." The Shark gave Balat a pointed glance.

"True. But that's why I have you—to give them other, more inviting trails to follow."

"Hmm." The Shark pulled off the tail of largest of his lobsters and cracked the shell with a flex of his massive hand. Pulling out the succulent meat, he drowned it in the bowl of butter and consumed it in three large bites. "And once you have the Seasons, I get what I want?"

“As soon as my transactions for them are safely completed, I’ll give you everything you need to destroy your enemies.”

“Then we have a deal.” The Shark shook back the long coils of his green-black hair and cracked one of the lobster claws with his teeth. “Shame those witches of yours can’t whip up a scry spell for me. I’d give anything to see that *krillo* Merimydion’s face when he discovers all three of his precious *oulani* princesses are gone.”

*Konumarr, Wintercraig*

“Holy Halla, home of all good gods!” Summer muttered the mild curse beneath her breath and tried not to gape at seemingly endless mass of perfect male humanity striding boldly down the crowd-lined streets of Konumarr.

Yesterday, Gabriella had been telling the truth when she assured her sisters she wasn’t the least bit nervous about the Calbernans coming to Konumarr, but today that same statement would have been a flat-out lie.

Beside her, Spring gave a stunned, wordless noise, while Autumn grabbed Summer’s hand and whispered, “I know what you mean. I think I’ve died and gone to Halla.”

The Calbernans had arrived. Fifteen ships full of men: a literal invasion force. Only this time, instead of being greeted with swords and arrows as they had this past winter, the invading Calbernans marched down the streets of Konumarr beneath a celebratory shower of flower petals.

Summer found herself shrinking back as the Calbernans, tall, dark, barbarically handsome, drew closer to Ragnar Square and the royal party that had assembled to greet them. She’d always found the Winterfolk intimidating, with their broad shoulders and towering forms, but the Calbernans were even more so.

They were practically naked, clad only in bright, embroidered cloths that wrapped around their trim waists and fell to mid-calf, fluttering open to reveal flashes of long, muscular legs as they walked. Each man sported a wide, jewel-encrusted belt, gleaming golden bands at their ankles and upper arms, and wide golden torques at their necks. All also sported iridescent blue tattoos that curled in curious patterns across their heavily muscled, hairless bodies, and all bore an iridescent blue tattoo that curled from the corner of their right eye across their right cheekbone. Their feet were bare. Their long, green-tinted black hair hung down their backs in springy ropes. Bells on their ankle bands chimed with each long-legged stride.

As if they needed chiming bells to draw anyone’s attention! Good gods, a woman could be deaf, dumb, and blind, and still be drawn to the Calbernans like a moth to a flame.

Summer’s stomach curled up tight. The Calbernans were shockingly primitive, their fierce, powerful, unrelenting maleness utterly and unsettlingly displayed for all to see. And try as she might, she could not tear her eyes from the biggest, strongest, handsomest of them all . . . their prince, Dilys Merimydion, Sealord of Calberna, son of the Calbernan *Myerial*, *Alysaldria* I.

He was huge. A few inches shorter than Khamsin’s husband Wynter, but nearly half a head taller than almost every other Calbernan or Winterman. Power radiated from him, fierce and unmistakable.

And he was beautiful. She could think of no other word for it. The long ropes of his hair were a glossy black that glinted deep, mysterious green in the sunlight, framing a face that was breathtaking in its symmetry, strength, and uncompromising lines. From the firm blade of his nose to the full, sensually sculpted lips, to the strong jaw, high cheekbones, and the deep-set, mesmerizing eyes of a bright, glittering gold. Even the exotic tattoos that swirled across his burnished bronze skin were beautiful, swirling patterns that sparkled in the sun and drew attention to every impressively carved muscle in his arms, broad shoulders, massive chest, and taut, rippled abdomen. More tattoos circled his equally impressive legs, teasing her with flashes of shimmering blue and bronze each time he took a step.

His bright, golden eyes fell upon her, she blushed and looked away, embarrassed to be caught staring, but the moment she felt the intensity of his gaze move away from her, she hazarded another peek.

Sweet Halla preserve her. He was magnificent.

The red rose-shaped birthmark on her inner right wrist—proof of her royal Summerlea heritage—warmed and began to throb, pulsing with the accelerated beat of her heart. Beneath the many bright, jewel-toned layers of her sumptuous court gown, a fire sparked inside Summer's body, a hot, restless, hungry fire that burned hotter with every rhythmic stride of the Calbernan's long, flashing legs.

Calberna's prince was too big. Too male. Too unsettling. Too appealing. Too . . . everything. And for her, that made Dilys Merimydon pure, deadly poison wrapped up in a dangerously tempting package.

Summer Coruscate, the princess who could never allow herself to love, would choose a million lackluster Prince Rampions or consign herself to a life alone before she ever risked her heart and her sanity by wedding a man like Dilys Merimydon.

Leading the same army of men who had sailed with him to conquer Wintercraig and Summerlea, Dilys strode boldly down the streets of Konumarr to a much different welcome than the one they'd received only a little over six months ago.

Instead of swords and arrows and armed defenders, the city was decked out for a celebration. The streetlamps were twined with garlands of greenery and blossoms, and festooned with ribbons of ice blue, white, and deep, rich rose. Wreaths and blossoms hung from every door and window. Wintercraig flags—the white wolf's head on a field of ice blue—waved at every doorway. And every plaza had been transformed into a feast hall set with massive wooden tables and chairs. The aroma of roasted meats and vegetables filled the air.

Winterfolk and Summerlanders alike lined the way four and five deep, and it pleased Dilys immensely to note that women and children outnumbered the men ten to one. They watched the Calbernans march past with wide eyes, and more than a few of the younger women nudged each other, blushing and giggling behind their hands the way girls often did when trying to catch the eye of a handsome man. That pleased Dilys as well. It was good to know his men would find a warm welcome here among the ladies of this land.

He knew the men following behind him were casting their own gazes across the potential wives gathered for the next three months of courtship—all while also keeping a



careful eye on the heavily armed and armored Wintercraig guards stationed along the procession route, of course.

As per the conditions of his negotiated agreement with Queen Khamsin of Wintercraig, not one of the Calbernans carried a weapon, but no Calbernán—even unarmed—was truly vulnerable. They carried protection with them in their bones—the sharp, deadly battle claws and teeth, currently hidden from view but ready to snap into lethal place at a moment’s notice. And that was the least of their natural defenses.

Dilys eyed the deep, cold waters of the fjord that ran alongside the procession route all the way back to the enormous palace built into the steep mountainside. The brave young Winter Queen had either been very wise or very foolish in choosing this spot for the Calbernán’s visit. Where there were large quantities of water, be it river, lake, or ocean, Calbernans would always hold the upper hand. Dilys even more than most, bearing his mother’s great gifts inside him as he now did.

As much as he liked Khamsin of the Storms, Dilys hadn’t survived a lifetime of mercenary work by being a gullible fool. If today ended up being an ambush rather than a warm reception, blood would flow like wine.

It wouldn’t all be Calbernán blood, either.

When none of the Wintercraig guards drew a blade, he concluded that wisdom had guided the young queen, choosing the location specifically to put Dilys and his men at ease. And in that, she succeeded. Their procession to Konumarr Palace proceeded without incident, and though not as raucous as they might have been for their own kind, the gathered throngs cheered the Calbernans as they marched past.

He supposed that shouldn’t surprise him as much as it did. Dilys and his men had, after all, helped defeat the Ice King and his dreadful army.

The city’s main street led to a wide plaza that Dilys’s Wintercraig handler informed him was called Ragnar Square, and there, the procession stopped. Only Dilys and his officers crossed the plaza to approach the blossom- and vine-festooned landing where Wintercraig’s royal family and Dilys’s future bride awaited.

Dilys let his gaze roam with undisguised appreciation over the three Seasons gathered just behind Wintercraig’s king and queen.

The reports and artists’ renditions of the three dark Summerlander princesses had not done them justice. Each one of them was beautiful beyond words, with dark, silky skin, big, thickly lashed eyes, and full, shapely lips made for passionate kisses. Each wore form-fitting, jewel-toned gowns in shimmering silks that exactly matched the color of their eyes.

Two of the Seasons—the auburn-haired beauty, Autumn, and Spring, the —watched his approach with bold, unflinching gazes. The third, a lovely, blushing *myerina* with tumbling waves of blue-black curls spilling about her shoulders, was more shy. She hung back between her sisters, watched him with wide, shocked blue eyes when she thought he wasn’t looking, then hurriedly glanced away from him whenever he tried to meet her gaze. That would be the little honeyrose, then. The sweet, sunny-tempered Season called Summer, beloved for her exceedingly kind heart and gentle ways.

He returned his attention to the two Seasons the Bridehunters had approved for him. Though he hadn’t believed it until just now, the odes to Autumn Coruscate’s beauty were no exaggerations. If anything, they did not do justice to her vibrant, stunning perfection.

She was entirely exotic and utterly intoxicating. From her pansy-purple eyes and long, extravagant curls of deep auburn hair that reminded him of a spectacular ocean sunset, to the lush curves displayed to perfection in her deep amethyst gown. The fact that she was watching him with undisguised interest bode well for the coming months of courtship.

Although Spring—the princess the Bridehunters had decided would be the best match for him—did not possess quite the same jaw-dropping exquisiteness of the youngest Season, she was still any man’s definition of lovely. Her eyes a clear, piercing green, her hair a long, straight fall of inky silk that draped down to her waist, her body slender and shapely. Best of all, in Dilys’s opinion, was her cool, bold, challenging stare.

Calbernans didn’t fear a woman’s strength. They celebrated it. Admired it. Wed it, if they were lucky enough. There was no greater treasure than a bold, brave, fearless wife who would pass on that bold, brave, fearless blood to her daughters and sons.

Just looking at her, Dilys could tell Spring would give him one Hel of a chase before he claimed her. Of course, she would think the claiming was all her idea, and he would be pleased to let her think so. He smiled broadly at the thought.

Dilys crossed the final distance of the plaza and came to a halt before the raised dais. His captains and their officers filed in to fill the space behind him, while the remainder of his men stood in neat formation in the main road.

The Winterman who had met Dilys at the docks to instruct him and his men on the protocols of the day now stepped forward and swept a deep bow to his king and queen.

“Your Graces, I present to you the Sealord Dilys Merimydon, son of the *Myerial* Alysaldria I, Lord Protector of Calberna, Keeper of the Golden Isle of Cali Kai Meri, Admiral of the First Fleet, Commander of the Seadragons, the most celebrated battlegroup of the Calbernan Navy, and Captain of the *Kracken*, flagship of the Seadragons.”

Dilys stood proud as his titles rolled off the tongue of the Winterman announcing him. When the introduction was concluded, he put his right fist across his left breast and bent slightly at the waist, keeping his head high, his gaze fixed on the Winter King. To bow deeply was to expose one’s neck, to offer vulnerability in a gesture of both trust and submission. Dilys and his men bowed that way to no man.

“Sealord Merimydon.” Wynter of the Craig, the White King, returned Dilys’s greeting with a nod of his own. “Six months ago you came to these shores as invaders, but today, my queen and I welcome you and your men to Wintercraig as honored guests. It is our hope that this day should mark the beginning of a long and prosperous friendship between our two nations.” The Winter King’s ice-blue eyes were cold and steady. A flurry of white swirled in those eyes, and the air around Dilys grew instantly frigid.

Most men—especially those dressed as lightly as Dilys and his men—would have turned blue with cold and begun shivering. But Calbernans, who lived and swam in all the depths of every ocean on the planet, were arguably the hardest race in all of Mystral. They could regulate the temperature of their blood, and beneath their bronze skin grew a thin layer of insulating flesh that kept them cool in summer and warm even in the iciest depths of the sea.

So, as the temperature around him plummeted, Dilys’s body reacted instinctively, blood heating to counteract the effects of the cold. All the while, he held Wynter Atrialan’s gaze without fear. A small smile played at the edges of his mouth.

He understood what was going on. The Winter King was just making sure Dilys knew that though the Ice King had been defeated, the infamous power of the Ice Gaze was still Wynter Atrialan's to call upon.

He inclined his head in acknowledgment of the warning. The snow faded from the Winter King's gaze, and the air warmed again swiftly.

"Peace and friendship between our lands is my hope and the hope of the *Myerial* as well, Wynter of the Craig," Dilys replied. His gaze fell upon the small, dark beauty standing beside Wintercraig's king, and his small smile spread to an open grin of appreciation. She was resplendent in pale buttercup yellow, the mound of her advanced pregnancy clearly in evidence.

To her, he bowed deeply, an elegant, respectful, admiring sweep, and bared his neck. "And you, Queen Khamsin. Love and motherhood suit you even better than bravery and battle. You are exquisite. *Doa akua*, your husband, is a lucky man."

"Thank you, Sealord Merimyrdion." Wintercraig's young queen smiled, even as the husband at her side gave Dilys a dark, suspicious look and edged closer to his wife.

Just to prick the Winter King in retaliation for his earlier icy warning, Dilys held his warm, deeply admiring glance a few seconds longer. Then he drew back, becoming all business as he introduced his fellow captains and their first officers.

"This handsome fellow is my cousin Arilon Calmyria, descendant of the great *Myerial* Siesulania V, Keeper of White Bay and the Sister Isles, Fleet Commander of the Stormriders, and Captain of the *Orca*." Dilys and Ari could easily have been twins, they looked so alike. The only truly notable difference between them, besides Dilys's slightly more impressive collection of tattoos, was that Ari stood three inches shorter than Dilys.

Ari bent slightly to Wynter, then gave a full, sweeping bow of Calbernan respect to Khamsin. As he rose, he met her gaze, his eyes sparkled with even more deep admiration and masculine appreciation than Dilys had shown for her womanly gifts.

"It is my pleasure indeed, Queen Khamsin of the Storms, to make your acquaintance." Ari spoke in a sensual purr, his voice set on full simmer. "My cousin's considerable praise these last months did not do you justice." In last winter's invasion, Ari had remained with the ships just off the coast of Wintercraig, protecting the beachhead and the invaders' flank while Dilys and his men met up with Falcon; thus Ari had not fought the Ice King nor met Khamsin.

Khamsin's cheeks turned a dusky rose as Ari focused his considerable charms on her. "The . . . ah . . . pleasure is mine, Sealord Calmyria," she replied in a somewhat breathless voice. A faint growl rose in Wynter's throat, which only made Ari's warm smile widen and grow warmer.

Dilys gave him a subtle kick in the ankle as he moved to introduce the next Calbernan nobles who had accompanied him up to the terrace. "And this fine son of the sea is my cousin Ryllian Ocea, descendent of the *Myerial* Kailuani III, Keeper of Silversands Isle, Fleet Commander of the Wavedancers, and Captain of the *Narwhal*." Ryll was as dangerous and fearsome a Calbernan as they came, as well as being a master sailor who could steer a galleon through rocky shoals in a dense fog without receiving the tiniest scratch on the hull of his vessel. He had an uncanny sense of waves and currents and

exactly how they would react at any given time. Dilys could control the seas, but Ryll could become them.

Though Ryll could be every bit as provocative as Ari or Dilys, he'd obviously decided they'd pulled the wolf's tail enough. He bent his spine to Wynter, bowed deeply to Khamsin, but kept his considerable masculine charms under tight wraps as Dilys continued to introduce the rest of their fellow captains and first officers.

"Welcome, Sealords," Khamsin said with a smile when he was done, "and it is my pleasure to introduce you to my sisters, the Seasons of Summerlea. Their Royal Highnesses, the Princesses Spring, Summer, and Autumn Coruscate."

"Myerialannas," Dilys let his expression show his profound appreciation for each of them. "It is with great joy I greet you." He tried—and failed—to catch the little honeyrose's eye, but the other two met his gaze and nodded their acknowledgement of his greeting.

"Sealord," said Spring, her tone as cool as a frosty morning.

"Sealord." The exotic Autumn arched one haughty brow and looked down her slender nose.

He grinned at them both.

"Sealord," whispered Summer, her eyes fixed upon his Adam's apple.

She really wasn't much smaller than her other sisters, he realized. She was just so slender and slightly built that, coupled with her timid demeanor, she seemed much more delicate and fragile. And he clearly made her nervous. The pulse in her neck was fluttering like a trapped bird, and she was doing everything in her power not to attract his attention.

Taking pity on her, he turned his attention back to Wintercraig's young queen. Now here was a woman who had proven her mettle in every way possible. Had she not already been wed and to a man she loved when they first met six months ago—he would not have left Wintercraig without her.

"It is our pleasure to welcome you and your men as our guests for the next three months," Khamsin said. "Sealord Merimydon, as we discussed in our previous communications, we have prepared accommodations in the palace for you and your officers. Are you certain you prefer the rest of your men to remain quartered on your ships?"

"I do." It seemed wiser. His men had, after all, last come to Wintercraig as invaders. Keeping them aboard ship at night seemed the safer course, in case any of the Winterfolk held a grudge. He did not want violence to mar this opportunity for him and his men to find *lianas* and forge ties with Wintercraig.

"Very good. The folk of Konumarr have prepared a celebration to welcome you and your men to Wintercraig. Sealord Merimydon, if you will come this way to help us start the festivities." She turned to her husband and held out her hand. Together, with Dilys beside them, they walked to the edge of terrace overlooking the city.

They looked out over the gathered throngs of Calbernans, Winterfolk, and Summerlanders, and in a carrying voice, Wynter began to speak. "Six months ago, Sealord Dilys Merimydon of Calberna and the men accompanying him today came to the shores of our kingdom. They came as invaders, unaware that Rorjak the Ice King had arisen. But Queen Khamsin, wise and brave beyond her years, convinced the Sealord and his men to fight with us rather than against us. Thanks to our queen's wisdom, courage, and

weathergifts, the bravery of our own people, and the Calbernans' renowned skill in battle, the Ice King was defeated. Together, Winterfolk and Calbernans—led by Queen Khamsin and this man, Sealord Dilys Merimyrdion—saved me, saved Wintercraig, and saved the whole of Mystral.”

A raucous cheer went up, and this time there was no doubting the genuine enthusiasm sent up by Winterfolk, Summerlander, and Calbernans alike.

“In thanks, we have invited the Calbernans who participated in that victory to return today and live among us for the next three months as trusted friends. It is the custom of Calbernans to seek wives from among the women of other lands, and the privilege of courting wives from those of you willing to entertain the possibility of such a union was one of the tokens of gratitude Queen Khamsin agreed to in return for the Calbernans' vital assistance in defeating the Ice King.

Now Khamsin stepped forward, and her voice rang out, carrying on a controlled breeze. “For the next three months, these men will live among us. Use this time to get to know them. Wedding a foreigner, leaving your home and all that you know is a big decision, not to be undertaken lightly. Take your time. Make the choice that is right for you, but make it freely. To wed or not is your decision.”

“My queen is absolutely right,” Wynter added in a firm voice. “These men were guaranteed three months to court a wife, not the certainty that they would find one. If any of you feel pressured in any way, come to me or the Queen immediately, and we will put a stop to it.” His hard gaze swept over the Calbernans' horde.

Standing beside Wynter, Dilys arched a brow, amused rather than offended by the suggestion that a Calbernans would ever need forceful means to win his *liana*. If a woman was unattached and in possession of a pulse, she would not long remain unwilling in the face of a determined Calbernans' courtship.

“Above all,” Wynter continued, “know that whatever you choose, you will always have a home here. There is work, food, and shelter in Wintercraig or Summerlea for any woman or child who desires it. Those of you who choose to wed and leave, know that you go to Calberna with our blessing. And to any Calbernans who takes a wife from among the citizens of Summerlea or Wintercraig, know that should you so desire, you would be welcome to stay here, with your wife, as a citizen of this kingdom.”

Dilys kept his easy smile. No true Calbernans would abandon his homeland to become *oulani*. Calberna was built on the devotion of its sons and the strength of its women. And while fate had necessitated that most sons of Calberna find their mates from among the other peoples of Mystral, a Calbernans and his *liana* returned to Calberna—always.

Khamsin glanced up at him. “Sealord? Would you like to add a few words of your own?”

He nodded and stepped up to the balustrade to address the crowd. “First, I wish to thank King Wynter and his brave and gracious *liana*, Queen Khamsin, for their kind welcome. My men and I look forward to our time among you, and to returning to Calberna in three months' time with *lianas* of our own by our sides. My men are well capable of speaking for themselves, but on their behalf—and my own—I will just say this. In Calberna, our women—all women—are treasured. A Calberna's devotion to his *liana* is unwavering and eternal. Your joy is our joy. Your happiness and comfort our sacred duty.

No woman has ever regretted taking a Calbernán to mate, nor ever will. The decision to wed is your choice, but if your choice is to wed a Calbernán”—he turned to direct his last words to the Seasons, and for the first time caught gentle Summer’s startled blue gaze full on—“you will never make a better one.”

Her eyes were like the clearest waters. A pure, deep, sparkling blue, shimmering with light and warmth and inviting waves. They called to him, those eyes, as surely as the sea itself, and for one instant, the world fell away and he was diving deep and fast, into endless, magical, beautiful blue. In that instant, he’d felt a perfect peace, a sense of rightness he couldn’t explain. Like finding home after a lifetime of wandering.

A loud wave of sound crashed over him, dragging him back to the surface, to reality. He sucked in air, as breathless as if he truly had dived deep, and turned to see the crowds cheering, and the celebration begun.

Queen Khamsin was saying something. He frowned and tried to focus his rattled brain into some semblance of coherent thought.

“—a feast prepared for you and your officers at the palace.” She waved a hand towards the wide stone bridge that crossed the fjord to the sprawling palace on the northern shore.

He forced a smile. What had she said? Something about following her to a feast? She was looking at him expectantly, her body half turned as if to leave. He took a step, and knew he’d chosen correctly when she smiled, took her husband’s arm, and began to lead the way.

He glanced back at the Seasons, but where there had been three, only two remained. Summer was gone.