

CHAPTER 1

My first mistake was to let the flameblasted idiots outside my cottage door know that I was awake.

“Stop knocking!”

Muttering to myself, I scrambled in the dark for a match and a lamp, and snagged my bare foot in the heavy wool blankets, tumbling onto the icy floor.

The knocking grew louder.

“I heard you. I’m not deaf or dead, though you’ll wish you were both if you don’t stop that racket.” I groped for the match and lit the lamp with another curse as I shook my foot free. Fumbling for the rumpled tunic and trousers I’d thrown aside hours ago, I tugged them on, picked up a boot, and discarded it in disgust. “Stop knocking.”

They did, the very moment my other boot smacked against the wooden door with an echoing thud.

Hastily running fingers through tangled long, dark curls, I rubbed bleary eyes and shivered. “Who’s out

there?” Cautiously prying the door open a crack, I waited for an answer as a pale sliver of moonlight traced a delicate line across the wooden floor.

I may have been half asleep and dreaming, but I wasn't stupid.

Silence.

Finally, a low sigh, aggravatingly familiar. “It's me, Alex.”

My second mistake was to open that wooden door and let the flameblasted idiots come in.

Jules. At this uncivilized hour, and with barely restrained amusement in his tone. Damn idiot. I flung the door wide open, slamming it back against the wall so hard a dish rattled behind me somewhere in the pantry.

“Do you know what time it is?” I planted one hand firmly on my hip, in case he missed the point. “Do you?”

“All too well.” As he yawned, moonlight framed light brown hair, catching the glint of mischievous humor in sleepy green eyes.

“Then what—” I caught his subtle glance and ever so slightly cocked eyebrow to the deep shadows at his side. “You'd better make your dying peace with the lords of the sea if you've shown up in the middle of the night with another potential husband.”

Something, or someone, moved in the darkest part of the shadows, and laughed in a rich tone that I hadn't heard here in Port Alain in a very long time. Far too long.

“Still as cranky as a beached whale on a stifling summer's day.”

“Elena?”

A dark-clad, slender figure crept from the gloom to stand blinking in the meager light from my lamp. “May we come in? Please? Or must I trudge up to the Hill and awaken Jules’ family for a warm fire and comfortable seat?”

Utterly caught off guard, I inched back to give them enough room to come inside. Shivering again, though from more than just the frigid floor beneath my bare toes, I knelt, head bowed, keeping sight of Elena from the corner of my eye. “Majesty.”

“You’re not serious?” Throwing her woolen hood back, Elena Dunneal turned dark blue eyes to Jules with a sharp look of disgust. “She’s not serious?”

Lords of the sea, but I was. How could I not be?

“Alexandra Daine Keltie at your service,” I murmured, bewildered at Elena’s unexpected appearance after long months of uneasy silence.

“Alex. I’m tired and cold and far more thirsty than anything else. I brought a peace offering for waking you so rudely in the middle of the night.” She thrust a bottle of Marain Valley wine under my nose, forcing me to look up.

“Well, alright then.” I grinned, as Jules Barlow yanked me to my feet.

Hugging Elena close, I stepped back to study her delicate features. It’d been almost a year since she’d come south to Port Alain, in high spirits, happy to be away from the stifling politics of Ardena. That was until swift change overtook her peaceful, happy life, four

months past, that thrust Elena onto the Tuldamor throne. Shocked at the sudden death of her king and father, there'd been no time for private words, and she'd withdrawn from every one of us.

Except Jules.

And that was something Jules' wife tried very hard and very often to put in perspective, not always successfully. I didn't blame Lauryn for that failure. I blamed Jules.

Framed by long, thick black hair, Elena's face was strained and exhausted. And royally annoyed. "I won't have you doing that," she said quietly.

"Waking up grumpy at such an uncivilized hour? Can you blame me?" I led her away from the door into the small parlor.

Cozy and very much suited to my needs, the cottage was my home, though it didn't have to be. Rosanna, Jules' mother, respected my beastly need for privacy and solitude. But it bothered the old seawitch because she knew all too well what kept me away.

Elena waved a slender hand to catch my attention. "No. Kneeling and bowing and all that submissive nonsense. I get enough of that in Ardenna, and very little of it is meant with respect."

"You thought I was being respectful? Good, then I can still fool you. Anyway, you are my queen." I arched a brow at her. "Or have you decided to run away and leave the crown to little Brendan?"

"Little?" An unroyal snort followed. "Do you mind if I sit?" She yawned, looking very much like the old

Elena who ran barefoot with the rest of Rosanna's hooligans. "I really am tired."

"Do queens need permission? Or are you just being polite for old times' sake?"

Elena sent a poisonous look my way before glancing curiously round the cluttered room, and then past Jules to my small bedchamber, tucked away at the back of the cottage. "Did we interrupt anything?"

"Would it matter?"

"I'd be far more apologetic."

"And curious," I added dryly. "Here." I gestured her in the direction of a low armchair, carefully setting a well-thumbed pile of books on the floor. "Jules, is it beneath your pompous dignity as Duke of Port Alain to build up the fire while I open this bottle of wine?"

"Not if I do it for an old, cranky friend." He scampered well out of reach, not an easy trick in my cozy, cramped cottage.

"Old?"

"You are a bit older than me." He tossed his light woolen cloak onto the pile of books, toppling them over. "Sorry."

"Liar." I smacked his hands away from my precious books and pushed him in the direction of the cold fireplace. "Two months only in age, but twenty years' worth in intelligence."

Rummaging around the pantry, I found the sharp, thin blade I kept for such important tasks. Gripping the bottle, I neatly plucked the cork free and sighed as I caught a whiff of the rich aroma.

“Must I share this?”

“I’m afraid so.” Elena flung her own cloak on top of Jules’, creating a mound at her feet. “I’ve been dreaming of it all the way from Ardena.” Accepting the glass I offered, she raised it with a calculating grin. “To my older friends.”

Jules lifted his glass, as I did mine. Smooth as silk. Definitely worth being tossed out of a warm bed in the middle of the night.

“So, Elena.” I plopped down by the now-blazing fire, resting comfortably against some old, faded pillows that Rosanna had embroidered for me. “Why are you here in the uncivilized middle of the night?” As she sent Jules a guarded look, I added, “Not that I’m unhappy to see you, of course.”

And not that I hadn’t missed her terribly.

“Of course.” Dark blue eyes studied me, very cool and very calculating. And suddenly very demanding in an unfamiliar way. “Jules is in a bit of trouble. And that might include you.”

They were flameblasted serious.

Jules shrugged at my baffled expression. “Elena came to warn me.”

“Couldn’t she send a courier?”

I thrust cold, bare feet toward the fire’s warmth, wiggling my toes. What had I done? And to whom?

“Alex. This is serious.” Elena kept her eyes fixed on mine.

“I don’t doubt it.”

She stared at Jules for a long moment, then past him

when it became obvious he wasn't going to explain the situation. No surprise. Jules always avoided confrontation unless it was to his distinct advantage or unless, as was usually the case, he was backed into a corner.

"I don't know who to trust in Ardenna," she admitted, after a strained, uneasy moment, reaching for the half-empty bottle. The Dunneal ring, a gold crown set in a circle of sapphires, caught the fire's roaring blaze as she twirled the bottle in her hands. "With my father gone so suddenly," her voice was hushed in the tense silence, "none of his counselors were ready to deal with me, despite all the preparations he'd made over the years to ensure a smooth succession. And with mother gone these past few years, he hadn't been quite himself."

I murmured something comforting, acknowledging her grief, still so raw, prompting a sad smile to her face.

"The counselors are somewhat better now, after some months of my hardheaded manipulation, but they don't truly see me as an adult. I'm surrounded by sweet-talking, deceitful, self-serving diplomats and retainers full of politics and full of themselves. And what they managed to sneak behind my father's back—"

"I can't imagine."

"Then try and imagine the worst. They weren't ready for me, and I wasn't ready for them." She shook her head in disgust. "Besides," she smiled shyly, "Part of the reason I came tonight was to see Brendan."

"As though I'd mistreat your brother," Jules complained. "You have very little faith in me."

"I miss him. I'm all alone all too often." Elena met

my suddenly intent gaze with a flush of embarrassment. “And I’ve no one but myself to blame for hiding when you and everyone here wanted to help me. You don’t have to remind me, Alex.”

Before I could add anything pointedly related to Jules, and the fact that Lauryn had been fretting, Elena changed her tone, setting the bottle on the table beside the armchair.

“But that’s not why I’m here. There’ve been rumors that Jules is under suspicion of treason against me. It’s so ridiculous, I shouldn’t even have to respond. But the Ardenna Crown Council of Mages wants him closely watched, and that means I have to take the rumor seriously. You see, Alex, they’re watching me, too. They’re trying to destroy the only solid link I have with the Tuldamorán duchies.”

“Jules?”

“Don’t be snide. Yes, Jules. You know how influential he is with the other dukes.”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

“Alex—”

“Sorry. Go on.”

“The Crown Council of Mages doesn’t like my politics any more than they liked my father’s, which only adds to our mutual distrust. I can’t help being suspicious—” She caught herself, and waved a hand in frustration.

“About what?”

She shut her eye for a moment. “I can’t shake the feeling that they had something to do with father’s

death, as well as mother's accident three years ago. But it's something I don't think I'll ever be able to prove."

I glanced at Jules, who shrugged. "You never said anything."

"Nothing to tell," he said quietly. "As Elena said, we've no proof."

"It's not important now," Elena intervened.

"It may be if they're looking to get rid of you."

"They do think Brendan's easier to manipulate, if only for his youth, so, yes, maybe it's true. There've been rumors that Jules is plotting with some—" she quickly glanced his way, and I couldn't read their exchange. "Well... some interesting parties to get the Tuldamorán throne back into his family's possession."

I turned from watching Elena and stared at Jules, keeping my tone bland. "There's usually a thread of truth in any rumor. Guilty?"

"Of course not," he snapped in hurt annoyance, pushing light brown hair from his rugged good-natured face. "Why would I want to be bothered with that nuisance, anyway? Governing Port Alain is enough trouble."

"I was just looking after my queen's interest, and protecting you from your mother's wrath."

"Alex."

I ignored Elena. "Whom are you supposed to be conspiring with?"

"The Meravan government, for one—"

"Meravan? That's absurd," I protested, recalling what I knew of the neighboring kingdom. "They're too

desperate for our trade to keep their people fed and clothed. With their erratic seasons, they depend on us. We're their closest trading partner and, unless I've misunderstood your father's policies, Elena, we've never taken unfair advantage of that, when any other country would."

Elena turned to Jules with a smug look. "Even when she's not in the schoolroom, she still sounds like a schoolmistress." Before I could defend myself, she turned back to me, still smiling. "You're right. But the Crown Council of Mages seems to think that Meravan's monarch is becoming greedier."

"Is that new?"

"No. They've always tried to change our agreements, and would never openly admit that they're fair. But they are fair."

"And the Meravan monarch well knows what Elena thinks about the current trade agreements, because she's reminded their ambassador several times," Jules defended his queen.

"Diplomatically, of course," I slid in, earning a grin from Elena.

"That won't stop the Crown Council of Mages from suggesting to Meravan that perhaps a new face on the Tuldamor throne might present an opportunity for more favorable trade. At some risk to our merchants, though the Council would never admit that." Jules shrugged in an offhanded fashion, though his eyes were grim. "Nor do they care."

"Absurd," I muttered, tucking my bare feet beneath

me and stretching for my glass of wine, all but unforgivably forgotten. “Alright, my queen, whom else are you plotting with?”

Elena met my gaze without blinking, and I found myself suddenly tense. “That brings us to your part in all this.”

“My part?” I said slowly. “What? Am I guilty of infiltrating treasonous thoughts into the children’s lessons?”

“You’re not exactly guilty of anything,” Elena hedged. “The Crown Council wants the local mage council here in Port Alain to keep a close eye on you.”

“What in hell for?” I demanded, unfortunately quite aware why they might have an interest in the local schoolmistress, whose long-dead mother had been a rogue seamage.

“Good question.” Elena exchanged a furtive glance with Jules. “That brings us around to the other party tangled in this plot.”

I crossed my arms to avoid pulling the words from her royal tongue.

“The Crownmage.”

Crownmage? I laughed outright in relief. “The Crownmage doesn’t exist. Everybody knows that. There, you see how easy it is to prove our innocence.” Still chuckling, I put the glass back down, almost missing the dark glance that flashed between my two friends. “Please don’t tell me you believe in the Crownmage.”

Elena leaned forward in earnest. “The Crownmage

exists. The Council's convinced—"

"The Crown Council? That's even more absurd, Elena. I expected better from you," I said in disgust. "The one political group you distrust the most believes in something that's probably conjured out of a child's bedtime tale, and you fall for it like a frightened infant."

"Alex—"

"The Crownmage is a legend. The last one appeared five centuries ago, according to unverified records. If he really existed. There hasn't been one since. And," I said firmly, "there won't be another." I clenched my fists in irrational annoyance, trying to sound convinced, desperately trying to convince them so we could chat about something less distressing.

"How can you be so absolutely sure?" Elena asked, a dangerous, unsettling look in her dark blue eyes. "Your mother—"

I scrambled to my feet, scattering pillows across the floor. "Leave my mother out of this."

"She was a seamage from Port Alain."

I quickly cut her off and grabbed the wine bottle.

"Yes, and her mother was a seamage. Neither of them left anything in their rather long-winded notes and studies that ever hinted at the possibility of another Crownmage. I know that doesn't prove anything," I said defensively, as Elena's raised eyebrow spoke eloquently, "but something as important as a Crownmage would have to be discussed somewhere."

"Your mother kept records—"

"Yes she did, for all those renegade mages who re-

fused anything to do with the mage councils. She was damn curious and had sources all over Tuldamorán who sent her information. I know, flameblast you, because I have it all. And I've read every last word," I said, catching surprise in Elena's blue eyes. "If there was a Crownmage to be found anywhere on this planet, my mother would have known the moment he took his first breath and cast his first spell."

I poured more wine all around, hand shaking, until the bottle was empty, and gave it a mournful glance before tossing it aside.

"And you?" Elena's voice was a trace too casual.

I spun around to face her. "What about me?"

Dark blue eyes held my gaze without mercy or remorse. She'd learned a lot these last four months in the capital, and I wasn't sure I liked what I saw. "What kind of mage are you?"

Royal flameblasted Seahag. "Are you blind? Elena, you grew up with me. You spent summers here for as long as I can remember. You know I'm not any kind of mage. I never had—"

"Lies." She calmly tapped slender fingers against her wine glass. "Well, alright, Alex, maybe not lies. Denial perhaps. I clearly remember some rather strange incidents when we were children," she added smoothly, slanting a furtive look at Jules as she took another dainty sip of Marain wine. "And apparently, so does the Port Alain council of mages."

A knot formed in the pit of my stomach at the thought of the local council. "I remember, too." My face

flushed scarlet in betrayal. “Whatever I managed to do was a childish trick. I had absolutely no control over anything. Water, air, fire, earth. Not over any of them. You should remember very well.”

“Alex—”

“You pushed me to keep trying until Jules—” I looked down at my hands, unwilling to pursue this conversation. “Forget it.”

“How can I forget it,” Elena’s voice had softened, “when you’ve never quite forgiven me for that incident?”

I looked up. “Jules could have been seriously hurt.”

“But he wasn’t.”

“He was lucky.”

“And you were scared.” The softness vanished, her expression now cool and unreadable. “You were frightened then, and you’re frightened now.”

“Damn you, Elena. I wasn’t a mage then. And I’m not a mage now.” I faced her stubbornly across my tiny cluttered room, feeling claustrophobic. “I’m not.” After an uncomfortable silence in which neither of them offered any sympathy, I grumbled, “And even if I were, although I’m not, and I don’t know how to convince you, what does that have to do with Jules’ trouble?”

After a tense glance at Elena’s composed face, Jules drained his cup and set it down on the table. “If I’m supposed to be plotting treachery with the Crownmage and the Meravan government, the Crown Council in Ardenna will undoubtedly have our local Port Alain council of mages keep an eye on me. Since they’re watching you, too, I thought—” Jules flushed scarlet.

“We *both* thought,” Elena added quietly, taking pity on him, “that if you’d been developing any mage talent, you know, Alex, on your own without telling anyone, you might be able to help.”

I sat in rigid silence.

“But as you haven’t,” Jules shrugged uneasily, his expression letting me know that he was still unconvinced, “I’d just be grateful if you at least kept your eyes and ears open without getting into any trouble with the council. I need proof of my innocence, any way I can get it, or the Crown Council of Mages will all too happily hang me.”

“Maybe they should.” For the wound he ripped open and the dreams I knew would return the moment I fell asleep.

“Alex, please—” Elena’s plea cut through my bitter thoughts.

Lords of the sea, it was the middle of the night, and I was never any good at thinking with a muddled head.

“How do they imagine your treachery, Jules? Rather, your *alleged* treachery,” I amended dryly at Elena’s sharp glance. “Let me make an intelligent guess. Meravan raiders start creating diversions and trouble, possibly even using their own mage talent, for poor, insecure, newly crowned Elena, who has no choice but to turn to the Crown Council of Mages for help.” When neither of them said a word, I continued, “Then the legendary Crownmage comes out of hiding and, on behalf of Jules’ claim to the throne, offers formal Mage Challenge to

Elena's mage of choice, because the traitorous duke has been secretly conspiring with the Crownmage."

"Now listen—"

"And me? Am I supposed to be the liaison between you and the Crownmage?" I ignored Jules' murderous expression, knowing it would only get worse. "Now here's the part I don't quite understand. What's your motive for wanting to take the crown from Elena? Oh, wait," I slapped my head, "How could I forget? It's so simple, even your twin boys could unravel this puzzle. Vengeance for a love gone wrong, but not quite forgotten, isn't that right? You've always wanted Elena to step beyond friendship, and you still do. But she wasn't interested, Jules," I said, adding cruelly, "and still isn't. So I presume that's why you're allegedly seeking vengeance."

I refused to soften my words. They hadn't bothered to soften theirs.

"Am I right?"

"That's not—" Jules' started to protest but his words trailed off in embarrassment as he turned away from me and Elena, who'd been grief-stricken at causing him pain when she'd first rejected what he offered a lifetime ago.

"That's what my sources are reporting," Elena answered calmly for Jules, though her cheeks were flushed as she glanced at his averted face. "Apparently, it wasn't as much a secret as we'd hoped."

"Too bad. It's not something you'd want your enemies to know," I murmured, "not when they can use it against you."

"Too late for that," she said regretfully. "But there's

more, Alex. There's already been trouble along the Belbridge coast. That's why you—"

"Tell me something, Elena. What's my motive in this sordid affair? Am I siding with Jules because he's convinced me over the years that you're not fit for the throne? Am I jealous?" Orphan child reared her ugly head in my mind, though I tried to banish her. "Power hungry? Or maybe I'm just a spineless coward, lacking the guts to go after power of my own—"

Elena raised a hand to stop my fevered words. "I don't know, but with Jules under suspicion, and perhaps you, too, I'm pressed to keep a balance in how I deal with both of you. With Brendan squiring here at Port Alain, I have to make it appear that our relations are somewhat normal."

I laughed, not bothering to hide my bitterness.

"But I'm forced to show some distance between us if I'm to trap whoever's behind the rumors. I don't trust any of the four mages on the Crown Council. So you see, Alex," Elena was practically pleading again.

"That you're in a very uncomfortable position? Comes with being queen," I said wryly. "But for you and Jules, and maybe myself, well, damnation, you know I'd do anything to help you." Caught between laughing and crying, I added, "No. *Almost* anything. So if you want my help, and I can't think what help a schoolmistress can give, well, alright." I stared at both of them, all traces of my humor vanished. "But know this. I don't trust either of you. You're the dearest people in the

world to me, but that won't matter."

Elena's flush deepened, staining her cheeks. "How can you say that?"

"Because you're holding something back from me. Or maybe you're both just a little mad. I don't know, too much Marain wine maybe."

"Alex—"

"If I get caught in the middle of some nightmare you've kept hidden from me, I'll hound you both until the end of your days. I promise you that."