

Chapter 1

“Two formal state dinners in three months is asking entirely too much of me.” Having voiced that complaint rather loudly, I sank with grateful abandon onto the pile of plush embroidered cushions next to Anders Perrin, my husband of five years, in the queen’s private parlor, where our small group of friends had sought escape from the noisy crowd of courtiers and diplomats. “No offense intended, of course, my lord,” I murmured to Derek Frontish, the senior elder from the land of Spreebridge, our northern and formerly unfriendly neighbor.

“None taken, of course, Mage Protector,” the gentleman smiled, a stiff grimace that did nothing to soften the formality of his demeanor nor the expression in his deep black eyes

as he used my ridiculous title, which the queen had spitefully bestowed on me some years earlier. “Your aversion to formal occasions is well known. And, I confess,” the diplomat made an effort to broaden his smile, “if not for the pleasant company in which I find myself at the moment,” he nodded at the rest of our cozy group, “I would be as averse as you.”

“Elder Frontish, you surprise and disappoint me. I expect that reaction from Alex, which is precisely one of the reasons I command her presence at these events, but I certainly don’t expect it from you, as a seasoned representative of your people.” Elena Dunneal, reigning monarch of Tuldamorán, and my very close friend, didn’t try to hide her amusement as she leaned over and patted me affectionately on the cheek, with a wink at my husband, who didn’t bother to hide a grin.

“Flameblasted royal seahag.” I cast an absent glance around the elegant but simple furnishings, trying to find a legitimate excuse to leave the capital of Ardenna in the middle of the night, steal my four-year-old daughter from her doting grandparents deep in the Glynnswood forest, and flee back to Port Alain.

“Alexandra, really—” Anders scolded, using my full name to annoy me further, then adding a sharp tug at a strand of my shoulder-length dark brown curls. “Is that any way for the queen’s Mage Protector to act, particularly in front of an honored visitor from Spreebridge? Not to mention the fact that he’s the guest of honor—”

“I’m being civilized.”

“She *is* being civilized, according to her standards,” Elena

reassured him with a grave smile. “But Alex,” dark blue eyes feigned innocence, as Elena toyed with her half-empty wine-glass, “it’s not often that the most-distinguished elder and mage from Spreebridge comes to visit Tuldamoran on a formal mission and—”

Before I could reply to her logic, Jules Barlow, duke of Port Alain, leaned away from the safety of the silk-covered wall at his back, perilously close to a drunken slouch, and tapped me on the shoulder. “In case you’ve forgotten, O Fierce Mage Protector of the queen, not only is the distinguished elder mage from Spreebridge sitting opposite you, but so is the ambassador from Spreebridge.”

“Him?” I waved an airy dismissal in Jackson Tunney’s direction, where bright green eyes studied me with equal humor. “His eyes are too indecent for that man to be taken seriously as an ambassador, in my humble opinion.”

“Don’t take her comments as a personal insult.”

Elena planted a lingering kiss on Jackson’s lips, fully aware that Elder Frontish was watching, which made me wonder if she was testing the limits of his tolerance. Spreebridge folk, with the exception of the likes of Jackson Tunney, had the reputation of conservative, dull, and restrictive behavior and mindsets. If we were to nurture a new trade relationship with our northern neighbor, then Elena might just be thinking that it was best for this particular gentleman to observe the differences in our behavior. However, while we may have had a less formal society, it was no less governed by the rule of law. And knowing Elena, who never did anything

without a good reason, she may have simply been letting him see several different facets of our interaction.

“Alex is just jealous of you,” she was still busily telling her lover, who didn’t need the slightest bit of reassurance, “because for the last five years, her splendid mage talent is no longer unique but precisely like yours.”

“And she’d rather yours had been like mine,” Anders cut in with a wide grin, swiftly dodging my fist.

“Precisely,” I grumbled. “I’m annoyed at both of you.”

And with good reason. In five short years, I’d changed my thinking from flatly denying my unconventional mage talent, which allowed me to transform one element to another, to rejoicing in the gift. And it *was* a gift, granted by the lords of the elements, making it possible for me not only to save Elena’s throne from a traitorous coup, but also, soon after, to capture dangerous rogue mages from the kingdom of Spreebridge some years back. During that adventure, Anders and I had crossed paths with Jackson Tunney, who’d been sent by the elders in Spreebridge to help snatch the mages and prevent them from further criminal behavior. When Elena and Jackson came together in Port Alain at the end of that affair, the two had eyes for no one else. The rest, as they say, was history of sorts.

When we’d encountered Jackson on that journey, he’d brought a surprising revelation in that his mage talent was similar to mine, as well as offering some comfort from thinking I was a freak. But Anders’ magic was still unique, a legendary figure come to life, come thankfully into my life.

As the legendary Crownmage, Anders could control and transform each element within itself, a feat that no ordinary mage could do. Most mages, like my long-dead mother, a seamage, had control over one element only. And Glynnswood mages, like my father and half-brother, from the semi-independent duchy within Elena's kingdom of Tuldamorán, could only change one element to another, as could mages from Spreebridge. Elder Frontish was one such example.

Trying to get to the bottom of this tangle, I'd spent the last few years trying to understand how the mage bloodlines worked, curious as to the type of mage child that Anders and I had created. Emmy had yet to show any type of mage gift, but I believed it was only a matter of time. It would have seemed an unnecessary waste of both Anders' and my mage talent for me to bear a child with no magic. But if it turned out that the imp had not the slightest inkling toward magery, it wouldn't change the simple fact that Anders and I adored the child.

"Doesn't matter," I shrugged. "I'm better and faster than Jackson, anyway." Ignoring Anders' snide comment about my childish behavior, I rolled up the silk sleeves of my gown, which I couldn't wait to rip off in exchange for something more comfortable. Closing my eyes tight, I coaxed the internal fire and ice awake, blending them easily into cool warmth that tingled through every inch of my body. "That pitcher of water," I pointed at the low wooden table between Jules' wife, Lauryn, and Jackson, "will become flame quicker than—"

"Alex." Anders jabbed me with a sharp elbow, destroying

my concentration, setting the cool warmth to piercing fire and ice. “You’ve had a little too much Marain Valley wine with dinner and apt to start a blaze to ruin Elena’s very expensive furniture.”

“Stiff-necked wretch,” I pouted, turning my back on my husband and challenging the queen instead. “Admit it, Elena.”

“Admit what?”

“That you invited Elder Frontish to Tuldamorán simply to get me to come to Ardenna, because you know I hate coming to this infernal, noisy, smelly city.” I pulled at Elena’s long black hair until she stopped whispering in Jackson’s ear to send Anders a sidelong glance that shared their mutual suffering at my hands.

“Fine. I admit it. For no other reason, Alex, absolutely. Elder Frontish and I had nothing whatsoever of a serious nature to discuss in the matter of trade between our nations. In fact, considering that our new relationship is the most historic event since we opened trade with Meravan, our neighbor across the Skandar Sea, that little point is of no significance. Is that correct, Elder Frontish?”

“Absolutely,” the gentleman replied, sitting back on his cushions, apparently getting more relaxed in our contentious company as time went on.

“See? I knew it.” Elbowing Anders, I gave him a smug grin. “You always scold me for being disrespectful to the queen but that’s precisely why I am. I’ve known all her tricks since we were children, and, trust me, Elena is very well aware

that I hate coming to this decadent, rude city and,” with a bright smile for the gentleman from Spreebridge, “only came to this affair out of respect for Elder Frontish, not my queen. If only Brendan were here, I might have more respect for the crown. Even though he’s younger, Brendan has more respect for me.”

“Yes,” Elder Frontish interjected, inclining his head toward Elena, “I was sorry to miss your heir and brother. Even north of our border in Derbarry, I have heard many good things about that young man.”

“Don’t ever tell him that,” Elena laughed, her dark features reminiscent of Brendan. “He was sorry to miss you, too, but he’s finally old enough,” her grin was openly affectionate, “for me to delegate some tasks that I prefer not to do myself. Brendan should be back within the week, though I fear it will be too late for you two to meet on this visit. However, if you still plan to accompany the first shipment of precious gems from your mines in the Keshtang Mountains,” she threw in official business to spite me, I knew it, “I’ll send my brother to welcome you on your arrival.”

“That’s because she’s lazy, Elder Frontish, and can’t bear to leave this horrid city to visit her royal subjects.” Which was, of course, a complete and utter lie. Elena was rarely at home in the Ardenna fortress. More often than not, we found her knocking at our doors, a two-day journey south to Port Alain, where Jules ruled as duke, I terrorized the local school-children, and Anders plotted with Jules’ mother as they gardened together.

“Your majesty.” Anders bowed with the deepest respect from his comfortable perch on the elegant silk-woven rug. “Be assured that I keep my daughter far away from her mother when she behaves like this. Emmy will always treat you with respect and—” Anders neatly caught his balance as I shoved him.

“Leave my daughter out of this discussion.”

“Poor Anders.” Elena reached over to kiss my husband’s smooth-shaven cheek. “She mistreats you terribly.”

“She does, you know.” Blue-eyed Lauryn, quiet until now, decided to make some abusive noise of her own. “You wouldn’t believe what goes on back home.”

“Traitor. I can’t believe you would turn on me,” I grumbled, throwing a spiteful glance her way. “Just wait until we’re back in Port Alain and I have your eleven-year-old twins all to myself in the schoolroom.”

Lauryn tossed an auburn strand over her silk-clad shoulder, dismissing my threat. “I can’t seem to figure out why they adore you so.”

“Lords of the sea.” I flung an overstuffed embroidered pillow at her head. “You never side with them against me. Never. Ever. What’s wrong with you? Did my husband bribe you? Did Elena threaten your life? Did—”

“She should definitely do it more often.” Jules hugged his wife close, smug pride on his face. “When dear, sweet, loving Lauryn has a nasty word for you, Alex,” he raked a hand through disheveled light brown hair, making it more ruffled, “it seems to be saying something pretty clearly to me. In

fact—”

“Why not shut up and make yourself useful, my lord duke, and pour us some of that Marain Valley wine,” I suggested dryly, waving my thanks at the young serving girl, “since Elena’s maid was kind enough just now to bring in a fresh bottle. Defending my reputation is thirsty work.”

“So is offending you.” Jules reached behind Lauryn’s chair and poured us each a full glass of the rich fruity wine from the new bottle.

Jackson lifted his glass in a mocking salute but stopped, a curious expression in those indecent green eyes. He sniffed the contents, puzzled.

“Sour?” Anders held his wineglass close to his own nose and sniffed. “Possibly a bad batch of grapes from Tucker’s Meadow. I’m not entirely sure.”

“I’m the expert,” I said with confidence, sniffing my glass, then making a judgment call. “I’ll let you know.” That decided, I brought the crystal glass to my lips and tilted it back as Anders did the same.

But I was the one, the only one, who took a deep, irreversible swallow.

“No!” Without warning, Jackson leapt across the space between us to knock the glasses from both our hands. “Lords of the sea, Alex, no! Ah, no. Ah, damn!”

I sat motionless, the remains of my wine glass spilled onto my silk gown, trying hard not to panic at the open fear in Jackson’s eyes, because I knew all too well what that expression meant.

“What is it?” Elena’s voice tensed as she grabbed hold of Jackson’s arm and shook it with little tenderness, knowing full well that neither of us was playing a trick. “Flameblast you, Jackson, what is it? Poison?”

Jackson’s handsome face drained of all color. “Worse,” he whispered, miserable eyes locked on mine in sympathy. “Feyweed.” Jackson’s voice shook a little, as he glanced at Elder Frontish, the gentleman’s face expressing shock at his words, then back to me. “For Alex, it’s worse than poison.”

My eyes never left Jackson’s unhappy face, as I clutched Anders’ hand with a death grip, waiting for the inevitable loss. So abrupt and cruel and painful, that I cried out in horror and despair, I felt the deep, cold, unending well of emptiness inside me. Knowing it was utterly useless, I still tried to nudge my mage talent awake, searched for the piercing fire and ice that I had so long denied, but it was gone, utterly and completely gone, and I was lost. With a child’s whimper, I groped my way blindly into Anders’ stunned embrace, needing his comfort until I could breathe easy again.

No one moved or spoke in the horrible silence until Elena placed a trembling hand on my shoulder in comfort. “There surely must be a draught to reverse this disaster. Jackson, surely! Elder Frontish, there *must* be—” Lost in a fog of misery, I heard the quiet desperation in Elena’s voice and the hesitation in Jackson’s as he muttered something vague, joined soon after by apology in the elder’s voice. But Elena wouldn’t accept their answers.

“There’s no draught to reverse feyweed’s damage.” Gath-

ering resolve, I raised my head from the shelter of Anders' chest to face Elena. "I'm afraid I'm rather useless to you now, your majesty." I brushed dampness from my cheeks with the back of a hand and thought longingly of my daughter. "I don't think the Ardenna Crown Council of Mages, despite their well-intentioned behavior these last five years, would tolerate a Mage Protector for their queen who no longer has a drop of mage talent at her command." I started to rise awkwardly from the cushions, pushing free of Anders' protective grip, trying to ignore the cold void inside me, desperate to escape the pity I knew would be present if I dared look at any of my friends too closely.

"Alex, stop it." Elena's dark blue eyes were damp as she scolded me, trying to prevent my imminent fall into despair. "You're not thinking clearly."

"There's nothing to think about. I'm—I need to go home."

"It's the middle of the night." Jules reached out to grip my arm, swiftly sobered eyes dazed with anxiety and shock and, as expected, pity.

"We've crept in and out of Ardenna before in the middle of the night." Not wanting to lash out in anger at my innocent friends, I kept the overwhelming fury and bitterness from my voice, but the despair crept in, nearly crippling me. "Anders, please—"

Compassion eloquent in his cool seagray eyes, Anders stood swiftly and led me from the room, away from Ardenna, and away from my pain.



“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I couldn’t bear to stay there a moment longer.” Huddled tight against Anders’ chest, feeling safe and sheltered, I was uncertain whether or not he was truly awake. But I should have known better than to expect him to fall asleep when I was in such misery.

“I know. That’s why I led you out of there, against Elena’s pleas to stay until morning.”

When Anders ran a familiar hand gently along my spine, I shivered. Closing my eyes, I edged closer, snuggling against his bearish warmth.

“Only a little longer tomorrow morning, Alex, and we’ll be at your father’s home in Hartswood.” The lumpy bed creaked beneath his weight as Anders eased the tension from my neck and shoulders. Lords of the sea, but he was a patient man when I needed him to be. With not a single word of reproach or argument, he had stuffed our clothes into our travel bags while I changed into tunic and trousers, and led me out the city gates to a small inn on the outskirts of Ardenna. “Besides, it’ll do you good to see Emmy. It’ll do us both good.”

Emmy, Emila Rose, was named after the seamage mother I never knew because she died in childbirth, as well as the woman who raised me, Rosanna Barlow, Jules’ mother. Emmy had been born four years earlier, once I became convinced that I wouldn’t die in childbirth like my mother, who couldn’t protect herself from my raw mage talent. We hadn’t yet dis-

covered whether our daughter carried my talent or Anders' gift, or none at all. In the recorded history of Tuldamorán, never to our knowledge had there been a child born of a Crownmage and Mage Protector.

"How can I teach my daughter anything about magery when her own talent surfaces?" I whispered against Anders' chest, shivering again in his arms. "They stole that pleasure from me, too."

"We'll find an antidote, Alex. I promise you that."

"Don't promise something that's impossible."

Frowning, Anders placed a firm hand beneath my chin and forced me to look at him. "It's not like you to lose faith, Alex. Don't start now." When he saw the protest in my eyes, he covered my lips with his finger and shook his head.



"Mama!" My serious, serene, and always well-mannered four-year-old daughter shouted in wild abandon as she caught sight of us dismounting in front of my father's cottage late the next morning. We'd made the trip south along the Kieren River and then west over the Glynnswood border to Hartswood, at the center of the deep forest, in good time, despite the busy travelers blocking the road from Ardenna, now that winter's end was in sight. Anders complained not once about the swift, near reckless pace I set, anxious to put distance between me and the nightmarish reminder of what had happened in the capital.

Desperate for comfort, I snatched Emmy in my embrace as she wrapped one tiny arm around my neck and the other around her father's, hugging us both as though we'd been gone for a century.

"You can't possibly be my daughter." I stared at the child in mock horror as the seagray eyes she inherited from Anders studied me back from beneath long dark curls she inherited from me. "Impossible. Running about like a wild mountain lion. What will the people of Hartswood think of Elder Keltie's wild and reckless granddaughter?" I shook my head gravely and smoothed curls back from her pretty face. "You must be a changeling. Now, tell me, where is my little girl?"

Emmy laughed and hugged me tight. Lords of the sea, but I'd missed her terribly, even for the few short days we'd been away.

"And what is this?" Keeping my expression stern, I plucked a fanciful carved wooden horse from her tiny hand. "Did you make this, whatever it is? A dragon? Or is it a wild pig? I can't tell."

"Oh, mama. No. It's a pony." Emmy giggled and cast a sidelong glance at my twenty-year-old half-brother, a decade younger than me, who had, as ever, crept alongside us without the least bit of noise. "Uncle Gwynn made it for me."

"Did he now?" I barely managed to keep my balance under Gwynn's overwhelming bear hug. "And did he teach you to run about like a wild mountain lion and disgrace your grandfather?" Free from Gwynn's affectionate grip, when he went to greet Anders, I turned to welcome Maylen Stockrie,

the young woman who'd been my brother's constant companion for the past five years.

"No, Alex. I think she learned wild manners from you, though you will never admit it." Gwynn's dark brown eyes danced with merriment as he tugged at Emmy's curls, tickling until she finally gave in and laughed. "But I am teaching her to creep up on unsuspecting victims, such as her mother, who still makes far too much noise in the forest."

"Flameblasted nuisance. When will you ever grow up?"

"Is my son bothering you again? Shall I have him punished for troubling the queen's Mage Protector?" My father's gentle, bemused voice, coming so quietly from his cottage, shattered the brittle restraints I'd so carefully placed on my emotions. Anders instinctively grabbed Emmy from my weakened grasp with a murmured loving promise and shoved the bewildered child into Maylen's unquestioning arms. The moment Emmy vanished with Maylen, I turned for comfort in my father's arms, a far cry from my early hostility some seven years earlier, when Sernyn Keltie had unexpectedly entered my life.

"Bring Alex inside." Gwynn's mother and my stepmother, Anessa, appeared suddenly at my father's side, at the door to their low, sprawling cottage. "Now, Sernyn," she commanded, taking maternal control of the situation.

With a protective arm still around my shoulders, my father obeyed her wifely orders and guided me to a well-worn favorite armchair, away from any polite inquisitive villager who'd noticed our noisy arrival. Anessa forced a steaming

mug of cinnamon tea into my hands, holding her questions, and everyone else's, until I had settled down. Hands trembling uncontrollably, to my shame, I was saved from scalding when Gwynn's protective fingers closed over mine, steadying my grasp.

The three of them, along with Maylen, were family I'd long been denied, struggled against, and finally accepted with an open heart. For long years, I'd believed my father dead, until an innocent venture into the forest to understand my unconventional mage heritage had brought me face-to-face with Sernyn Keltie. For two long years, I'd hated the man, blaming him for my mother's death. After all, Elder Keltie, a mage as afraid of his own power as I'd been, had made my mother solemnly promise never to use her seamage talent when he was near. But Sernyn had never admitted the truth to my mother, that he, too, was a mage, never suspecting that the two of them would create a child with unusual powers.

And when my mother was deep in labor, giving birth to me, she couldn't even defend herself, never understanding what was happening inside her fragile body. For a lifetime, I'd blamed myself, and then I'd blamed him. It was a near miracle that I'd found the courage and strength to bear my own child. And five years earlier, my father and I had declared a truce. I'd forgiven him, taking his family into my heart and mind as fiercely as I'd fought to keep them away.

"I'm sorry," I murmured, shamefaced. "I promised myself I wouldn't be weak and make a scene when I got here."

"And if you cannot be vulnerable in front of your family,

then of what use are we?" Gwynn scolded, his hands resting lightly over my own, though they probably itched to tug at his still-misbehaving lock of hair.

"None. But I certainly shouldn't fall apart in front of you." I shot a crooked smile in my brother's direction, trying to lighten his concern. "You'll never let me forget. Worse, you'll tattle on me to Rosanna Barlow, who'll torture me, claiming that I'm human."

"That is true. But she will never believe it."

"Gwynn, leave her be." My father broke into our banter, running a slender, sun-browed hand anxiously through his graying hair. He leaned forward, studying my face with care, as though he were a healer like his wife. "Tell us what has happened."

When all I did was sigh, unable to relate the horrifying tale, Anders stretched out to touch my cheek before making himself comfortable on the woven wool rug at my feet. "Someone mixed feyweed into our wine. Alex was the only one harmed," he added, squeezing my fingers in reassurance. "It happened so fast, too fast."

Gwynn's easy voice was fierce. "Who did this?"

"We don't know. Not yet, anyway. I'm sure Elena will do whatever she can to find out the truth." Anders gratefully accepted a cup of tea from Anessa. "You know she won't rest, not when her closest friend has been so grievously hurt."

My father kept his face on mine, though his question was directed at my husband. "Was Alex the only target?"

"I can't be sure. We were all sharing the same bottle."

“Is it possible that one or more of the three renegade mages that you and Jackson Tunney captured five years ago made their escape from Spreebridge prison? Though the two women were out of their minds with madness, the lone man was quite lucid. And vengeance is something you are all too familiar with,” my father smiled sadly, placing a consoling hand on my arm, as I thought back on the war I’d waged and won against Firemage Ravess, who tried to topple Elena from the Tuldamor throne.

I shrugged, careful to take a sip of tea without spilling it. “It’s possible. If they somehow found a way to mix a feyweed potion, though it was supposed to be a secret known only to the elders of Spreebridge, according to Jackson. It’s not impossible that the mages, at least the male, wouldn’t do to us what we did to them. Knowing what it feels like, now, to lose my talent,” I admitted with bitterness and regret, “I wouldn’t blame them. It’s not something any mage should ever have to experience.”

“It is also possible that Jackson Tunney is involved.” Gwynn’s huge brown eyes locked on mine, daring me to argue, challenging me to counter his words.

Surprising my brother, I managed a wry grin at his handsome clean-shaven face, dangling a possibility in front of him. “Ah. It seems that you’ve never quite forgiven Jackson for striking you all those years ago, have you?” I asked, recalling the time when we’d stumbled across Jackson during our hunt for the renegade mages, not knowing at the time that the mage from Spreebridge was an ally or that he would become

the queen's lover.

"No." Though Gwynn's smile matched mine, it barely disguised protective fury. "But that is not why I mentioned him, Alex. I do have a sound reason that goes beyond my personal humiliation."

"And that is?"

"Mage Tunney has talent precisely like the rare mage talent you have."

"Had."

"Stop that." Gwynn frowned in annoyance when I tried to be practical.

But as far as I was concerned, the sooner everyone got used to the fact that I was without mage talent any longer, the better.

He added, "And do not forget the very important point that it was Jackson's idea to send the renegade mages back to Spreebridge for punishment, and far more significant, that *he* was the one who introduced us to feyweed five years ago to use against the rogue mages, which means that he knows how to mix the potion."

When I started to protest, Gwynn held up a hand with open impatience. Rather than argue, I took another sip of the rapidly cooling tea before gentle Anessa scolded me.

"And yes," he nodded, "so does Anders, though you still do not know the contents."

When Gwynn shook his head, bemused at my five-year refusal to know what herbs went into the making of feyweed, for fear that I would use it indiscriminately, I grumbled

something rude.

Ignoring me, my brother continued his argument. “And here is another point to consider, Alex. The queen has not married Jackson yet, though she is obviously taken with him. They became lovers soon after they met, so why has she still not wed him?”

Shrugging, I blinked at my brother, who was never this persistent and, in fact, had never broached this particular opinion with me. “I have no idea, though I’ve wondered myself.”

Sipping his tea, Anders exchanged a thoughtful look with Gwynn, and then my father.

“Stop that,” I scolded all of them. “Jackson’s never done anything to make us distrust him. Lords of the sea, Anders, he knocked the glass from your hand.”

“Before he knocked it from yours.”

“You were closer.”

“Maybe.”

“That makes no sense. If anything, your mage talent, which is still unique, is even more a threat than mine.” Unprepared for such distrust, I lost patience and slammed my near-empty teacup on the carved wooden table and stood up. “Don’t forget that Elder Frontish, a mage from Spreebridge, may I remind you, was also in Ardenna when I drank the fey-weed. It’s very possible that *he* was involved for reasons I can’t fathom.”

“Alex.” My father caught the wool of my tunic sleeve and held me back, though I shook his hand from my arm. “Stop

frowning, and hold still one moment more. While we may all be wrong with our suspicions, and I hope we are for Elena's sake, we should keep an open mind. About Elder Frontish, too." He held my gaze, his voice even and unstressed, despite my anger. The fact that he so easily offered advice and criticism was testimony to the strides we'd made over the last five years since I'd freely accepted him into my life. "Maybe we have been too trusting."

"You mean," I growled, correctly interpreting his carefully chosen words, "maybe *I've* been too trusting." When my father didn't answer, I turned my back on him and headed for the door to find my daughter. With one hand resting on the wooden frame, I stopped and spun slowly back to face him, aware of Anessa's concerned expression as she stood in silence behind her son. "I've never lived in constant fear, and I won't start now. Besides," I gave my father a pained smile, "the damage has already been done."

"To you." With brown eyes fixed on mine, Sernyn pressed his point. "But what about the others? Were you really the only target? What about Anders? Even Jackson may be a target, if we assume his innocence? If you are only one of the intended victims, then Anders is still in grave danger, particularly as he is Crownmage, with his own rare mage talent." My father shrugged, his expression eloquent. "That is why I caution you."

"Lords of the sea, but I hate you when you're right." Grumbling one vicious oath after another, I went out in search of Emmy.



“What will you do?”

Fastening Emmy’s wool cloak around her neck early the next morning, I pulled my daughter close, kissed her smooth forehead, and sent her outside to join her father. Gwynn had cornered me in the simply furnished guest bedchamber in the back of my father’s cottage.

“Go home to Port Alain, I suppose,” I replied.

“That is not what I meant, and you know it.” Gwynn didn’t bother to disguise his irritation, which made me wonder why he was being so prickly. His manner and temperament had always been more in line with the serenity that both his parents exhibited, while I was the contentious, cranky member of the family. To his credit, my father had never intimated that I’d inherited that behavior from my mother.

I sat back on my heels, braced against the bed, and matched my brother’s sober expression. “Years ago, when you were afraid I’d run away and that you’d never see me again, I told you it was quite alright to be angry with me. You haven’t been angry since, well, not really angry, but annoyed every now and then. But you’re certainly furious now. And I’m not sure I like it, particularly since I don’t understand it.”

“I am not angry with you.” Stubbornness crept into his voice. “But I want to know who was responsible. I am simply worried about you because—” Gwynn waved a rough hand in

a futile gesture, at a loss, and looked away, finally resorting to a futile tug at the rogue lock of brown hair.

“Because?” I prompted, crossing my arms, puzzled.

Gwynn shrugged. “How can I explain it? Sometimes you are tough, Alex, stronger than all of us together. And sometimes I am afraid that with one wrong word, you will—” He hesitated, choosing his words with care as he faced me again. “You are fragile now, vulnerable, and I am frightened for you.”

Lords of the sea, how had I ever survived my first twenty-five years without a younger brother? “I’m alright.” I stood up, muffling a groan of protest from my thighs, and ruffled his thick hair.

“Liar.”

“That’s my line.”

“Not this time. I told father I want to go to Port Alain for a little while.”

“No. Besides,” I added as the immediate protest formed in his eyes, “what will Maylen do without you here?”

My brother looked at me as though I were mad. Or a fool. Possibly both. “She will be with me, of course.”

“I don’t want you to come.”

“Why not?”

“What’s wrong with you?” I shouted, finally losing all patience. “You’re never this argumentative. You always give in to me and never win.”

My brother crossed his arms in open defiance. “Why not?” Though his tone was more reasonable, it was no less stubborn.

Oh hell. If I couldn't be honest with my own family, then what good were they? "I don't want you to see me like this," I whispered, blinking back tears that I was weary of fighting. "I feel useless, powerless, flameblasted empty, Gwynn, responsible somehow. We don't know what mage talent Emmy has yet, though lords of the sea know she's inherited a wild mix of potential. I wanted to teach her, show her how to use it. My mother didn't survive to teach me—" I couldn't go on and turned away.

"I told you," Gwynn spoke in the same gentle, measured voice he inherited from my father, "there is nothing wrong in weeping in front of those who love you. Alex," he edged closer, "from the moment I led you around our village five years ago to keep you out of trouble, knowing you for the half-sister I had never seen, I pledged myself to keep watch over you. I have been through adventures with you and will do so again. But for now, I just want to be within reach if you need me. Please do not fight me on this." He tugged insistently at my sleeve. "Please. It is important to me."

Wretched nuisance.

I sighed with heavy drama, wiped the tears from my cheek with the back of my hand, and turned to face him. "Well, I suppose Rosanna could use an extra hand to clean out the Barlow stables."