

# CHAPTER ONE

CALLEN TRIED NOT TO LOOK DOWN. This was the best vantage point in the east wing of the castle — a thick window ledge that looked out over both the main gate and a good bit of the Queen’s Road leading up to it — but the method by which the window achieved this singularly spectacular view was by being very, very far from the ground. It was by no means the highest point in the castle, but it was still a good deal higher than Calen normally preferred to go, and if he managed to fall, he suspected he would have a disturbingly long time to scream in terror and watch the shaped hedges rush up at him from below before he died a horrible and painful death.

He’d had to come, though. He wanted to catch that first glimpse of the procession as it approached, to witness the very beginning. It was like something from a story — a delegation from an enemy kingdom, bringing the prince of Kragmir to marry one of the princesses of Trelian and end a war that had been going on longer

than most people today had been alive. Certainly it was the most exciting thing to happen in Calen's life in a long time. Maybe the most exciting thing to happen in his life *ever*, at least once he'd figured out that becoming a mage's apprentice was not going to be the whirlwind of glory and adventure he'd briefly imagined. And he was going to be here to see it, the arrival of the enemy prince and his family and whomever else princes generally traveled with, the first moments of an event that would be recorded in history books for future generations!

His heart was beating a little faster just thinking about it. Obviously it was the excitement, and not the glance he'd accidentally taken at the ground just now that was causing his insides to jump around that way. Calen took a deep breath, settled his back firmly against the edge of the window opening, and struggled to keep his eyes on the distant hills and his mind on anything other than the vast empty space to his immediate right.

There was plenty he could think about, but most of it was not especially pleasant. The procession was supposed to have arrived hours ago, and Calen was getting later by the second but he wasn't leaving until he got to see something. He was bound to be in trouble — *more* trouble, he amended — once Serek discovered that he hadn't come straight back from the royal gardens with



the silverweed. Calen had picked the silverweed first, of course — he wasn't that much of a fool — but he knew Serek had expected him to return at once, and that he hadn't done. Instead, he had circled around through the kitchen entrance, run down the Long Hall, then climbed the many, many stairs to the guest suites on the eighth floor. Heavy rust-colored curtains concealed the large window, and once he slipped behind them, he was invisible to anyone who might pass by. Undoubtedly one of the soon-to-be-arriving guests would be stationed here, and servants might stop in to check that the room was ready. If anyone did see him, he'd be caught — no one would believe he was up here on the mage's business, and he'd be forced to go back and face his punishment and miss everything.

Technically, he hadn't exactly disobeyed. Serek had only *implied* that Calen should return directly; he hadn't actually said it. Not that this distinction would hold much weight with Serek, but it was enough to soothe Calen's conscience. Besides, it wasn't like there was anything to rush back for. Calen thought back to the argument they'd had earlier. Well, *argument* wasn't really the right word. Mostly it had just been Serek making pointed comments him about how lazy he was and glaring at him whenever he opened his mouth to defend himself. But he



*wasn't* lazy. He just . . . didn't care. He didn't see the point in learning things if you were never going to do anything with them.

A flash of light caught his attention, and Calen leaned forward a tiny bit, squinting. Had that been the sun reflecting off armor? It was hard to tell at this distance. There was no way he was leaning any farther out the window, but maybe if he stretched his neck out slightly —

“I think that's the prince's escort,” said a voice from directly behind him.

Calen jumped at the sudden sound and then screamed as he felt his balance desert him. He flailed uselessly at the air and had a moment to think, *This is it, I'm dead, I'm falling*, before he was jerked roughly back into the room and onto the floor beside the window. Heart pounding, and *not* from excitement this time, Calen looked up to see a girl about his own age standing above him.

“You dropped your flowers,” she said, smiling innocently.

He gaped at her, then down at the silverweed scattered across the floor. Still breathless with fear, and now angry as well, Calen stood up. She had nearly killed him! “You! You —” he began, unable to find suitable words for what he was feeling. Swallowing, he paused to regroup.



“You —” he said again, this time pointing one shaky finger at her for emphasis.

“You’re welcome,” she said. “I suppose I saved your life just now. You almost fell, you know.”

Calen stared at her incredulously. His eyes felt wide enough to fall right out of his head.

She looked back at him for a moment, then started laughing.

“Oh, your face —” she gasped, nearly doubled over with mirth. Calen, temporarily out of witty retorts, waited silently for her to regain control of herself.

“I’m sorry,” she went on, finally. “I really am. I didn’t mean to startle you like that, but after I pulled you back in, you were just so *funny* . . .”

Calen glared at her. *Funny*, was he? He knelt and began gathering the fallen silverweed with violent swipes of his hands. She bent to help him.

“Leave it,” he said, turning his back to her.

“Oh, please, don’t be like that,” she said, touching his shoulder. He shrugged her off without looking up.

After a moment she spoke again. “You’re right — that was terrible of me. To laugh, I mean. I’m not very well behaved at times, as Nan Vera would no doubt agree.” She held out the handful of silverweed she’d collected.



“Please,” she said again. “Let’s start over. I really am sorry. I’m Meg. What’s your name?”

Calen sighed. He hadn’t *actually* died, he supposed. And it would be nice to finally get to know someone his own age. It had been more than half a year since he and Serek took up residence here, and in all that time nearly the only young people he’d seen had been the royal —

He looked up at her, startled. “Meg?” he repeated stupidly. For the first time he noticed how she was dressed: her pale blue gown of obvious quality, the silver embroidery along the sleeves and bodice, the elaborate way her hair was twisted up behind her neck. And the delicate gold circlet resting above her forehead, glinting at him in shiny accusation.

“Meg — as in Meglynne? As in Her Royal Highness Princess Meglynne?”

*Oh no.*

Calen scrambled to his feet, then bowed, then changed his mind and dropped back onto his knees. “I’m sorry, Your Highness, I didn’t —”

“Stop,” she said. “Please, don’t do that. It’s just Meg. Now get up.”

“But, Your Highness —”

She kicked him, hard.



“Ow!” He fell over onto the floor, rubbing his thigh. Princesses weren’t supposed to kick you!

“If you call me ‘Your Highness’ again, I will throw you out that window, I swear it.”

“But —” Calen pushed himself back up to his knees. This was confusing. Serek had made him learn all the appropriate titles of respect, and it was definitely not appropriate to call one of the king’s daughters by her first name. Still, he almost believed she was serious about the window.

“Come on,” she said. “Get *up*.”

Calen just stared at her. Was it a test or something? What was he supposed to do? He couldn’t seem to bring himself to move.

Finally, she rolled her eyes. “Oh, very well. I *command* you to get off your knees and stop acting like I’m going to chop your head off. Rise and obey, by order of King Tormon’s third and least patient royal daughter.”

Calen got up.

“Good,” she said. “Now I command you to tell me your name.”

“Calen.”

“Good. Thank you. You’re the mage’s apprentice, aren’t you? I mean, you must be, since you’ve got



the . . ." She waved a finger at the marks on his face, nodding. "All right, Calen, pleased to meet you. Now I command you to stop obeying me. What are you doing up here, anyway?"

Lying to a princess probably carried worse punishments than skipping out on work. "I came up to watch the procession," he admitted.

She smiled. "Good. Me, too, So let's get back out of sight before someone comes by and sends us both back to where we belong. They're probably close enough to see by now." And with that, she disappeared behind the heavy curtains.

Calen rubbed his thigh, which still hurt from where she'd kicked him. Part of him wanted to slowly back away while she wasn't looking. But if he left now, all the time he'd spent waiting and the trouble he'd get in when he returned would be for nothing. And he really didn't want to miss the procession. He'd been waiting to see it for weeks! He shook his head and squared his shoulders. No one, princess or not, was going to stop him from seeing history in the making. He ducked back behind the curtains to join her.

The approaching party was indeed now close enough to see, and Calen knew at once that it had been worth the wait. Princes, apparently, traveled with a great num-





ber of people, at least when they were riding into an enemy kingdom for a war-ending marriage. A dazzling jumble of colors and banners and horses and riders was pouring slowly over the rise and down along the Queen's Road. Mounted soldiers led the procession and created a formidable-looking border around everyone else. Bannermen held the flags of Kragmir aloft and musicians played instruments, which Calen realized he must have started hearing a few minutes ago without knowing it. As they reached the top of the rise, a pair of wagons carrying wicker cages paused and men jumped down to attend to them; in a moment, scores of colorful birds burst from the cages and spilled up into the sky like a living rainbow. Calen couldn't help grinning in admiration. If the prince had been hoping to make an impressive entrance, Calen thought he was succeeding.

Meg had boosted herself up to straddle the window ledge, her skirts bunched up and one leg dangling insanely over nothing. Calen, not about to climb back up on there, contented himself with standing beside her and resting his elbows on the ledge. She pointed.

"See the man on the tall black horse with the red trappings? That's Prince Ryant of Kragmir. He's the one who's going to marry my sister Maerlie. She thinks he's *quite* handsome, but of course she's only ever seen his portrait,



and honestly, if I were painting a portrait of a prince, I'd probably make certain he looked handsome in it, too. They've never met in person, although they've been writing each other constantly since the betrothal. She thinks they might really be falling in *love*," she said, rolling her eyes again. "As though you can fall in love through letters!" But Calen thought Meg's face looked just a little wistful as she said it.

Meg turned her attention back to the scene below. "The three men directly in front of the prince are his personal guards. I met one of them before — Jorn. He's the one who brought Prince Ryant's offer of marriage. He has this scar that runs from one side of his forehead across his face and partway down his neck."

Interested, Calen squinted at the man he guessed was Jorn, trying to see the scar. "How did he get it?"

"No one knows, though there are stories enough. Everyone tells a different tale, but no one is brave enough to ask Jorn himself. Well, I would do it, but Nan Vera says it would be unforgivably rude, and I don't want to offend the prince's guard and embarrass my sister. I'm hoping Maerlie can find out the truth once she's married the prince. *He* must know."

Calen couldn't quite believe he was discussing scars



with one of the king's daughters. Were all princesses like this? Somehow he didn't think so.

"Your sister must be pretty brave," he said. "I mean, getting married to the enemy and everything."

Meg rolled her eyes again. She seemed to do that a lot. "Well, that's the whole point, isn't it? The marriage is supposed to bring the two kingdoms together so we can *stop* being enemies. Don't they teach you apprentices anything? Do you even know the story of why we were fighting in the first place?"

Calen shook his head. She was beginning to make him feel a little stupid.

"Oh, it's a good story," Meg told him. "Well, not good, exactly; actually it's rather terrible, but — well, here, I'll just tell you. Years and years and years ago — exactly one hundred as of next month, actually — Kragmir had a young queen named Lysetta. She had been a poor country girl, just like in a fairy tale, and all the people loved her. King Holister's first wife had died in childbirth, and he'd been so heartbroken that no one thought he would ever marry again, but they say Lysetta mended his heart and he came to love her more than anything. Soon after the marriage, Lysetta came to visit Trelian. That had been a tradition for as long as anyone could remember; every



time Trelian or Kragmir had a new queen, she went to visit the other queen so that they could get to know each other and become friends. Our kingdoms were steadfast allies back then.

“The night of her arrival, there was a grand feast, and Lysetta was formally introduced to the Trelian royal family and all the visiting dignitaries and whoever else had come for the occasion. Everyone was charmed by the new queen, and the evening was considered a great success, even though Lysetta retired somewhat early. The next morning she failed to appear for breakfast, and when Trelian’s queen — her name was Aliwen — went to her rooms to see if their guest was all right, she wasn’t there.

“Where was she?” Calen asked, drawn in despite himself. Meg was a pretty good storyteller. This was a lot more interesting than the XXX

“I’m getting there,” she said. “Just listen. When Lysetta hadn’t been found by midday, they began to search in earnest, for her escort was still at the castle and none of her attendants had any idea where she might have gone. They searched for two days and might never have found her, except that one of the kitchen boys reported hearing strange sounds in the cellar. When they went to look, they discovered a hidden passageway behind a wall,



and at the end of a long dark tunnel they found Lysetta, imprisoned in an iron cell that no one had known even existed. She was dead, but there were no marks to indicate how she died, and they never discovered why or how she had ended up there.”

Calen shuddered. He felt like a child at a ghost-telling, but he couldn't help it. He'd been down in that cellar countless times.

“When King Holister heard the news,” Meg went on, “he went mad with grief. He blamed Trelia for his young wife's death and arrived at the castle gates with an army. My ancestors tried to convince him that they had nothing to do with what had happened, but he refused to believe them and demanded the head of Queen Aliwen in retribution.”

“Her *head*?”

“Naturally, the Trelia king refused, and the Kragmir army attacked the castle. There was a fierce battle, and eventually Kragmir was defeated and returned home, but not without great loss of life on both sides. The war continued over the years, with violent assaults and assassination attempts and all kinds of ugly and horrible things.”

Calen was fascinated, the procession below temporarily forgotten. “But then — how did the marriage offer come about? If we've been fighting with them all this time . . .”



“My father and King Ryllin — that’s Prince Ryant’s father — had wanted to find a way to end the feud between our families. They had met each other as boys, completely accidentally, when Trelian and Kragmir had both sent envoys to the coastal nations in the south without realizing that the other kingdom was doing so, and there was a terrible storm and they all ended up at the same inn — that’s a really good story, too, actually. But the short version is that after that chance meeting they kept in touch, secretly, and wanted to find a way to stop all the fighting, but when they tried to make it happen, neither of their fathers would allow it. Now that the old kings aren’t around anymore to say no, and King Ryllin and my father both have children of marriageable age, they decided to try again. And the hundred-year anniversary makes it seem all the more significant and important. There are some who still don’t trust Kragmir and are against the wedding, but my parents both believe in Ryllin and the promise of peace.”

“And do you?” Calen asked.

“Of course,” Meg said quickly. “Certainly I want the chance to meet this Prince Ryant for myself, but my parents wouldn’t let Maerlie marry someone they didn’t trust. And no one can deny that now would be a very good time to renew the old friendship between our kingdoms.”



Calen knew what she meant by that, at least. Each time Serek sent him to the market for supplies, the traders — those who still came — always seemed to have new stories of thieves and bandits on the roads. And sometimes, worse things, although surely *those* stories weren't true. Supplies were stolen, or never sent at all, and there were even rumors that some traders who ventured into the vast Hunterheart Forest, which bordered the castle grounds and stretched over much of the distance between Trelian and Kragmir, disappeared and were never heard from again.

They watched as more riders came into view, Meg pointing out those whose names she knew and sharing bits of stories she'd heard about them. Calen had never met anyone quite like Meg before. She was nicer than she'd seemed at first, he thought. Maybe she couldn't help being bossy: She was a princess after all and was a welcome change from his usual nonconversations with Serek. Even if he was mostly just listening. It was nice to actually have someone to listen *to*.

When the prince and his guard reached the main gate, Meg jumped down from the window.

"I have to go — I'm sure Father will be angry I missed his discussion on how to behave at dinner, but if I'm not back in time to greet our guests at the table, I'll really be in trouble."



Thinking of trouble reminded Calen of his own situation. Serek would not be pleased he had been gone this long.

Meg started to push through the curtains and then turned back. She looked at him for a long moment. Finally she asked, "Can you get away tomorrow afternoon?"

"I think so. Why?"

She smiled mysteriously. "Meet me by the small gate at first bell. I'll share a secret with you."

