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with a blast." — *Kirkus Reviews*



THE MAGE OF TRELLEAN

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CHAPTER ONE

A GAIN. Calen quickly closed his eyes, trying to refocus. He knew that closing his eyes made little sense, given the perfect darkness of the vast hall surrounding them, but it seemed to help. And he needed all the help he could get.

He pictured the hall in his mind as clearly as he could, imagining the long empty tables, the wooden benches, the huge windows like gaping open mouths filled with thick glass. He pictured the tattered banners hanging limply from the rafters and the cold stone floor and on every surface — tables, rafters, floor, window-sills, everything — hundreds and hundreds of candles. Maybe thousands of candles, certainly more than he was ever able to count. They sat in the ceiling fixtures hanging from heavy iron chains above him and blanketed the stones around him except for a narrow pathway leading to the hallway door.

He envisioned them all, tried to hold every last one firmly and completely in his mind. Then he took a breath,

and on the exhale released a burst of magic energy, lighting every wick at once.

Or . . . almost at once. *No, curse you.* Calen opened his eyes just in time to catch the last few candles flickering into life at the far end of the hall. He'd felt them, at the last second, struggling to light. He tried to control his heartbeat, tried not to let his — concern — show as he looked at last to the older man sitting at the table beside him.

Mage Krelig smiled slightly in the glow of the candles around him, but that didn't mean anything. The man smiled when he was angry as often as when he was pleased. His face rarely gave clues to what he was thinking or feeling, and Calen had learned to just be wary at all times. Wary, but not afraid. Krelig had no patience for fear.

"That wasn't quite perfect, was it?" Krelig said.

Not afraid, Calen reminded himself. *You're not afraid.* He willed his breathing to be even and steady, willed his heart to slow down.

"No," Calen said. The mage's back had been to the straggler candles, but he still would have been able to feel their lateness to light. Bluffing was not even a remote possibility. "The last few were slow."

He waited to see what Krelig would do. He remembered how he used to be afraid of Serek. Afraid of



being yelled at, or insulted, or given tedious tasks as punishment.

He could almost laugh.

The first time he'd failed one of Krelig's tests, the mage had struck him, hard, across the face. That had been a shock, but now Calen missed those first few days, when the back of Krelig's hand was all he had to worry about. The next time Krelig had been sufficiently disappointed in his new apprentice's progress, he'd set Calen's hand on fire. Just for a few seconds, and Krelig had healed him immediately afterward — but those few seconds had been agony. Since then, Krelig had demonstrated various ways he could inflict pain as a consequence for failure. Knowing that the mage would heal Calen afterward didn't matter when the pain was happening. It wasn't always fire; sometimes it was pinpricks, or knives, or cold. Cold was surprisingly painful. One time he'd sliced off the tip of Calen's ear. He'd put it back; you couldn't even see a scar. Since then, though, Calen had noticed that he'd developed a nervous habit of touching the top of his ear with his finger. Just to make sure it was still there.

It was an effective method of teaching. Calen had never worked this hard in his life.

"Once more," Krelig said finally. He blinked, and all the candles went out.



Okay, Calen thought, closing his eyes once again in the new darkness. *I can do this. I can.* He set about envisioning the hall again, every feature, every candle. He had to do it this time; Krelig's "once more" had suggested that one more attempt was all he would allow, and then there would have to be punishment. Calen really, really didn't want to be punished. He wanted to go back to his room, to lie down on his bed, and think about his plans. And then he wanted to go to sleep.

When he slept, he dreamed. And sometimes he dreamed about Meg.

About home.

But that was for later; first, he had to do this. He cleared his mind, thinking only of the candles, of the countless wicks waiting to burst into flame at his command. He imagined them wanting to please him, wanting to help him please Mage Krelig. *No stragglers*, he thought at them firmly. *All at once. Together.*

He took three breaths this time, in and out, and as he released the third breath he released the magic with it, pushing it outward to reach those farthest candles a few seconds sooner than before, willing all of the wicks to ignite as one. *Please*, he started to think, and then crushed that impulse. *You don't beg magic to work for you*, Krelig had told him that very first day. *You don't ask. You*



don't hope or plead or wish. You command. You direct the magic to do your will, and it obeys.

Obey! Calen shouted in his mind as his energy reached the candles. *Light!*

They lit. All at once.

He felt it, felt the single great rush of his command received, his goal accomplished, and didn't need Krelig's satisfied grunt to know that he had done it perfectly this time. He opened his eyes again and took in the brilliant glow from the combined flames and smiled a little smile of his own. It felt good, being able to do it, to light so many at once. The candle-lighting spell was one of the first things every new apprentice was taught, but he'd never lit more than a handful of candles at a time before today. And he'd never even attempted lighting multiple candles at the exact same instant. He understood, of course, that it would probably never be necessary in a real-life situation to light a thousand candles exactly at once. It was impressive, sure, but not very practical.

But this wasn't about the candles; it was about learning control, about learning precision. And he was able to do something tonight that he hadn't been able to do this morning. Just like the night before, and the night before that. Whatever else Krelig was, and he was a lot of very, very terrible things, he was keeping his promise. He was



teaching Calen more magic, more swiftly, than Serek had ever done. He had not yet told Calen that anything was beyond him, that there was anything he wasn't ready to learn. Quite the opposite, in fact.

There was a price, of course. And it was more than just the pain and punishment, more than being alone with a madman in some distant fortress, preparing to wage war against the Magistratum and anyone else who stood in their — in Krelig's — way. It was the memory of his friends' faces as he'd turned away from them and gone off with the enemy. It was the knowledge that his true master thought he was a traitor. It was having to be away from Meg, knowing she needed him and that he'd left her alone to face the insanity of everything that was going on without him. Not that Meg wasn't totally capable of doing anything she wanted with or without his help, of course. Meg was the most capable person he'd ever met. But he knew what it meant to have a true friend to count on when things were bad, and he knew he'd been that person for Meg just as she'd been that person for him. And now neither of them had the other to count on, and it was because of what he'd done. He'd done it for her, for all of them, to stop Mage Krelig from killing them all on the spot. But they didn't know that. And so they probably all hated him now. He



wanted to believe that Meg, at least, wouldn't have given up on him, that she would know in her heart that he'd had a good reason for leaving. But she might still hate him for it. She might trust him and believe in him and hate him all at the same time. She wasn't exactly the most even-tempered person.

But he still believed that he could make it right. He would pay for his new knowledge, do whatever it took, suffer whatever he had to. And once he had what he needed, he would escape. He'd get back to Meg and Jakl and Serek and the others, return to Trelian and help them win the war and defeat Mage Krelig once and for all. He'd show them all that he was not a traitor, and more—that they had been wrong not to trust him in the first place.

But not yet. Not tonight, and not tomorrow, and probably not for weeks and weeks to come. But . . . soon. Eventually. As soon as he'd learned everything he needed to know.

"Pleased with yourself, are you?" Krelig asked, jarring Calen out of his own thoughts. He looked up, startled, but the mage's good humor seemed genuine.

"Yes, Master," Calen answered truthfully. "I like how it feels when I get something right."

The mage nodded. "As you should. There's no shame



in acknowledging your own accomplishments. Every mage should be proud of his talent. Proud and unafraid to use it. Our ability is what sets us apart, after all. It's the most important piece of who we are."

"Yes, Master," Calen said again. Krelig often waxed poetic about mages and their abilities, and how much better they were than everyone else. It was one of the reasons he hated the Magistratum so much, and the rules that other mages lived by. The idea of being marked or having to hold back from doing whatever magic he wished was offensive to him. Calen had heard plenty of rants on the subject at this point. He barely listened anymore.

"That's enough casting for tonight," Krelig said finally.

Calen nodded and started to rise. But before he was halfway out of his chair, Krelig spoke again. "I didn't say you could go."

Calen froze, then sat slowly and carefully back down. Krelig's face was expressionless.

"Master?"

"You didn't learn that quite as quickly as you should have."

You said once more, Calen protested silently. You said once more, and then I did it! But out loud he only said, "I learned it as quickly as I could. I thought you were pleased."



“But it *wasn't* as quickly as you could. You could have done it faster. You're still holding back.”

“No, I—”

“*Don't you say no to me,*” Krelig snapped, anger suddenly pulsing in his voice. “I sense the power inside you, but you refuse to release it. You insist on reaching in bit by bit, accessing a little more, and then a little more — *I don't have time for this!*”

Calen swallowed, afraid that anything he said would be wrong. But Krelig hated when you didn't answer him. “I'm trying as hard as I can, Master.”

“It's not enough. You must need some incentive.”

No. No, no, no. It wasn't fair; he'd gotten it on the third try! “I—”

“When my visions during my exile showed me that you would be . . . important . . . to my success, I am quite certain they meant you at your full power. Not this partial strength you insist on clinging to.” Krelig was studying him, eyes narrowed. “You must not truly want to unlock your full ability. How can I encourage you to want that, Calen?”

“I do; I do want that. I'll do better tomorrow, you'll see. I promise. You don't — you don't have to . . .”

Krelig shook his head, and Calen's stomach shriveled to a hard little knot inside him. “Apparently I do.”



And then the pain started.

Calen desperately tried to block the spell before it hit, but Krelig batted his attempt away without any apparent effort at all. The first wave of red fiery energy tumbled Calen backward onto the floor. He didn't even have a chance to scream before the impact knocked the breath out of him. Krelig walked over and stood looking down at him.

"I know it's in there. I can almost see it — such power, the power I need to defeat my enemies — and you keep it safely . . . locked . . . away. . ."

With each of the last three words, Krelig sent another beam of fire into Calen's chest, as though he were trying to burn a hole through him in order to let the magic out. It wasn't literal fire; even through the pain Calen could tell that he wasn't actually burning, but oh, gods, it felt like he was.

"Stop . . . please. . . . I'm sorry. . . ." He gasped out the words even though he knew they wouldn't do any good.

It seemed like a long time before Krelig felt he had been punished enough.

Calen lay there for a while after Krelig left. Eventually, once he stopped shaking and his heart felt closer to its normal rhythm again, he got up and picked his way along



the candle-lined path. He took one of the candles near his feet and relit it, continuing down the hall toward the stairway that would take him to his room.

Most of the halls and corridors were kept dark, but Calen knew the way to his room, and to the kitchens, and to wherever else he needed to go. And if he needed to go somewhere he didn't already know the way to, he knew how to find out. That had been an early lesson, and he had learned it well. On their second night at the apparently long-abandoned castle that Krelig had claimed for his new home, the mage had deposited Calen in the dark in some random corner of the lower levels and told him he'd have to find his way to his room without light or help. And then left him there alone. And then set some sort of hungry, monstrous creature loose nearby, to give Calen a little extra motivation. Calen had never found out exactly what it was, that thing, but he could still recall its insistent, eager cries and the sound of its too-many legs scabbling against the floor in the darkness just behind him. Calen had learned what he needed to very, very quickly.

He carried a little map in his head now, all the time. It was incredibly useful; he wished he'd known it was possible a long time ago. He could add to it whenever he wanted, and so could always find his way back from



wherever he went. His room, the one he'd chosen from the entire wing that Krelig had given him for his own, was at the end of a long hallway on the uppermost floor of the castle. It wasn't the largest room of the lot, but it opened up onto a huge balcony that provided a breathtaking view of the surrounding countryside. Calen still wasn't sure what country or kingdom they were actually in, but whatever it was, it was beautiful. He spent as much time out there as he could, looking at the trees and the mountains and watching the birds during the day, and staring out at the stars or the moonlight glinting on the distant river at night. He tried repeatedly to figure out which direction Trelian might be, but there was no way to tell without knowing where they were now. He didn't dare ask Krelig. Krelig would answer questions about magic without hesitation — he *wanted* Calen to want to learn, and as long as the questions weren't stupid ones, he would answer willingly. He was less tolerant of other kinds of questions. Calen had learned that lesson early, too.

When he reached his room, he doused the candle and reset the wards in his doorway (he wasn't entirely sure that the too-many-legged creature wasn't still out there somewhere) and went outside to look out at the night.



He really wished he knew what Krelig was talking about.

How could he have some secret reservoir of power within himself and not be able to tell? Krelig thought that he just wasn't trying hard enough, but if that extra power was really in there somewhere, Calen couldn't find it. He had tried. From the very first time Krelig had mentioned it, he had tried. But how could he access something he didn't really believe was there?

As always, he automatically searched the sky for a dragon flying toward him from the distance. It was foolish, but he couldn't seem to help it. And as much as part of him wished to see Jakl — Jakl with Meg riding on his back, coming to save him, coming to yell at him and probably kick him but also to save him and take him home — he couldn't *really* hope for that, because it was too dangerous. Maybe Jakl's resistance to magic would be strong enough to protect him from Krelig, but maybe not. And the mage could still set one of his nasty flying slaarh at the dragon, or more than one. He didn't think Jakl would be able to fight, say, five of the disgusting things at one time.

And he could hurt Meg either way. Calen had no doubt that Krelig could rip her apart just as he'd threatened that first terrible day when he'd come through the



portal and everything had gone so very horribly wrong. The man had *stopped time*. Killing one girl would hardly cost him any effort at all.

No, Meg could never come here. *He* had to go to *her*. He just had to figure out how.

And when.

Because that was the other thing, of course. He couldn't leave until he'd learned what he needed to defeat Mage Krelig once and for all.

Calen washed and changed his clothes and got into his bed and lay there for a long time before he fell asleep.

In the morning, as always, there were more lessons.

Calen ate his breakfast alone in the dining hall, as usual. Krelig must have acquired a cook from somewhere, because there was always food waiting on the table at mealtimes, but Calen had never seen anyone working in the kitchens or delivering supplies or even cleaning up. Krelig had never explained, and Calen suspected that questions in this area would be the kind Krelig considered a waste of his time. So Calen just ate what he found waiting for him without thinking too much about how it got there and left his dishes on the counter when he was finished. Then he went to wherever Krelig was waiting for him for that day's learning.



Krelig never told him where that would be; Calen had to find him. Which wasn't hard once he figured out how — it only took a bit of white energy sent along the castle corridors to locate the mage.

Today Krelig was waiting up on the battlements that ran along the entire perimeter of the castle. Calen emerged into the windy morning, clutching his cloak around him as he approached the older man. Krelig had cut his shaggy hair and beard since his return, and now looked somewhat less like a madman to the casual eye. But Calen's eye was anything but casual, and he knew that Krelig was completely crazy. Not stupid, though. He was about as far from stupid as someone could be, in fact. It was hard not to respect that about him, even while hating the rest. He was evil and terrible and cruel and unpredictable, but he knew so much. And, like Calen himself, he always wanted to know more.

What Krelig most wanted to know about, other than why Calen "refused" to access his full power, was Calen's special ability to see the colors of the different types of magical energy involved when someone was casting a spell. But unlike Mage Brevera and his friends back at the Magistratum, Krelig seemed to understand that it wasn't something Calen could teach someone else how to do. He just wanted to understand what Calen could see



and, Calen assumed, figure out how to use it in his war against the other mages. Calen just had to make sure he wasn't around to be used by Krelig when the time came.

He'd tried, early on, to lie about what he saw. But Krelig had known. He had known, and he had made it very clear to Calen that he should never attempt to lie about his ability again. Very, very clear. And so Calen always answered truthfully now, and held fast to his determination to get away. If Calen wasn't here, Krelig's knowledge about what he could see and do wouldn't make any difference.

Krelig was standing at the far edge of the battlement, looking out into the distance. He didn't turn or acknowledge Calen's presence at first, but as soon as Calen was close enough to hear him, Krelig said, "Stand there, and tell me what you see." Then he sent up a swirl of multi-colored energy into the air around him.

Calen stopped walking. "It's mostly blue and yellow and purple, but there's a lot of black and orange all along the outer edges of the other colors. As though all the colors have black and orange outlines, somehow." He squinted, interested despite himself, as was usually the case. Orange was nullifying or neutralizing, and black was for concealment. "Are you trying to hide the colors themselves?"

Krelig let the magic dissipate and turned toward



Calen, a half smile on his face. All traces of yesterday's anger seemed to be gone. For now. "Trying and failing, it would seem." Without changing expression, he suddenly sent a bolt of red and black energy directly at Calen.

Calen immediately sent out blue and orange magic to meet it, and the spells smashed into each other in the space between them, canceling each other out. Calen wasn't sure what Krelig's spell had been, exactly—although red magic was rarely anything pleasant—but he didn't need to know in order to counter it. This was one of the aspects of his ability that Krelig seemed most interested in: that Calen could create counterspells and defenses based on the colors he was able to see.

And Calen was getting better at sorting out the colors all the time.

Krelig sent a few more easy-to-decipher spells at Calen, all of which Calen was able to block or neutralize without any trouble. They started coming faster, requiring more concentration, but Calen had gotten better at concentration, too. And at casting for longer periods of time without resting. After a few more increasingly speedy but not-too-difficult spells, Krelig turned away as if getting bored. Then he raised his head to look at a bird flying above them. It was one of the bright blue and yellow birds Calen sometimes saw from his room. He



liked them; they made friendly chirping sounds to one another when they flew around, and lately one or two had begun to rest on the slim enclosing wall that lined the edge of the balcony when he was standing there. He kept meaning to find some bread or something to give them, to encourage them to visit more often. They made him feel a little less lonely when they came.

Krelig tilted his head and released a bolt of red energy toward the bird.

“Don’t!” Calen shouted without thinking, simultaneously sending a bolt of his own, willing it to intercept Krelig’s deadly little spell before it reached its intended victim. The mass of color flew from his fingertips without conscious thought, and only afterward did Calen notice what he’d sent and why. Orange for neutralizing; yellow for healing, in case his spell was too slow to stop Krelig’s but fast enough to heal whatever damage was done before it was too late; purple for motion and speed, which he guessed he’d included from some desire to make his spell move more quickly through the air. And it seemed to be working—his spell collided with and engulfed Krelig’s, consuming it into nothingness, and the bird, sensing the invisible forces clashing just a few inches away, gave a troubled cry and darted swiftly in the opposite direction.



Calen looked warily at Krelig. The mage looked back, seeming more curious than angry. “Friend of yours?” he asked.

“There was no reason to kill it,” Calen said defensively.

“No reason not to,” Krelig said, with the empty, careless cruelty that always made Calen’s stomach turn. But he still didn’t seem angry. That was good. After a moment he added, “You made your spell faster.”

“Yes.” It hadn’t really been a question, but Calen answered anyway.

“Did your former master teach you to do that?”

“No. I didn’t — it just sort of happened. I only realized afterward what I’d done.”

“Hmm. Could you have made it slower? Could you have made *mine* slower?”

Calen paused, considering. “I — I think so.”

“Try now.” Krelig released another bolt of red energy, but this one, Calen was relieved to see, was aimed only at the stone wall. Calen cast again, this time attempting to cast *into* Krelig’s spell instead of just trying to knock it aside or destroy it. He still used purple energy, but the intent was different, and so the effect was different as well. The colors were the *types* of magic energy, what a given spell was created out of, but each color could be used in countless different ways. He tried to shape the



magic into something that would infuse Krelig's spell and slow it down without otherwise altering it. He thought it worked, at least a little: the red bolt hit the stone with a small explosion, leaving behind a tiny crater, but not as quickly as it would have otherwise. At least . . . he thought so.

He looked at Krelig. The mage was nodding. "It should have hit a little sooner than that. Good. Try it again."

They continued for the better part of three hours, experimenting with speed and slowness. Calen was fascinated. He'd never thought about trying anything like this before. When Krelig finally declared the morning's lessons over, Calen was exhausted but exhilarated. He loved this feeling; despite the circumstances, despite everything, he loved it. It was like coming around a corner and discovering a whole new world, full of possibility. Every time.

"We'll be having company soon," Krelig said, just as Calen was about to head back down into the castle.

"Company?" he asked, turning back.

"The first of those mages who are choosing to join us." Krelig was leaning on the battlement, looking out at the surrounding countryside. "The first of those ready to cast off the shackles of the Magistratum and help to



bring about the new order.” He glanced at Calen and laughed. “Don’t look so shocked, boy! There are more discontented mages than you might imagine. Some will be too afraid or beaten down to admit it, even to themselves, but others will see that this is their chance to change everything. To remake the world into a place better suited for our kind.”

“What — what will happen to those who don’t choose to join?” Calen knew perfectly well what would happen to them, but he wanted to see what Krelig would say.

Krelig’s voice went very mild, and Calen was instantly sorry he’d asked. “What do you think, Calen? Do you think it will be safe to leave our enemies free to walk among us? Do you think we can all agree to live in peace together? Do you think they will stay safely locked in their cage of a fortress while we do as we wish with the rest of the world?” He turned back to look out over the wall again. “You are not that naive, my boy. Don’t waste my time asking questions you already know the answers to.”

“Sorry, Master. Do you know when they’ll arrive?”

“Soon, I think. I’ve been . . . sending invitations. I believe that some of them have been accepted.”



He fell silent, and Calen crept quietly away before he could do anything else to annoy the mage or draw back his attention.

He had known that Krelig planned to assemble whatever like-minded mages he could to join him, but somehow Calen had thought that wouldn't happen for a while yet. Did this mean Krelig was getting closer to starting his attack against the Magistratum? Calen hoped not. He wasn't ready.

I need more time.

He was learning so much, every day. Getting stronger, and better, and quicker. He wanted to leave, more than anything, but he had to stay long enough to make it worth it. The more he learned, the stronger he got, the better his chances of being able to help bring down Mage Krelig. Of stopping him from carrying out his evil plans. Stopping him forever, so none of them would ever have to worry about him again.

Because if they didn't, Krelig would take them back to the days before the Magistratum existed, when mages were free to use their abilities for whatever purposes they wished, without any rules or constraints of any kind. He would stand atop the rubble of the broken Magistratum and the fallen bodies of his enemies and demand that all nonmages bow to his will. That all kingdoms recognize



his authority over them. And if they refused, he'd destroy them, too.

And he could. Calen didn't know if anyone realized how incredibly powerful Krelig truly was. Calen hadn't been able to imagine many mages willingly joining Krelig's cause, but he knew — firsthand, didn't he? — that Krelig had ways of convincing people to do what he wanted. And even a small army of mages under his control would be more than any kingdom could stand against. But most of them would probably try anyway, because who wanted to submit to rule by a sadistic, crazy, evil mastermind? Trelian would certainly not go down without a fight.

But it would still go down. And Meg and everyone else he cared about would go down along with it.

He had to learn enough to save them. He hated it here, hated Mage Krelig and hated being away from Meg and hated thinking about what the others must believe of him now, but the learning would be worth it. *Was* worth it. Worth the pain and the punishment and the loneliness and everything else. Or it would be, once he was ready. Which would be . . . soon. But not yet.

Not quite yet.

There was still too much left to know.



CHAPTER TWO

A GAIN. Meg was on her feet before the whole word was out of the captain's mouth. On her feet and racing toward where Jakl was waiting, ready to run this drill a hundred more times if that was what she wanted. As soon as she touched his back, the dragon launched himself forward and shot into the sky. Meg let him go for a few seconds of pure, blissful speed before turning him back around toward where the soldiers waited below.

"Not bad," Captain Varyn said gruffly once they were near enough to hear him. Meg couldn't help grinning. She knew by now that "not bad" was about as close to a compliment as she was ever likely to get from the man. And besides, she could tell that that had been their fastest time yet.

Meg couldn't imagine when she might actually be called upon to leap up from the ground like that and fly away on Jakl's back on a moment's notice, but she supposed the Commander of the King's Army wanted her

to be ready for anything — and he'd never had a dragon to work into his plans before. So they practiced running, flying, leaping, hiding, sneaking, diving, carrying, and every other thing Captain Varyn and Commander Uri could think of. Meg didn't mind. She was still just so glad that they were letting Jakl and her fight at all. Well, that they *would* let them fight. So far it had just been drills, and practice, and training. The war had already started, but not for her. Not yet. But soon.

It had better be soon.

Not that she was so eager to put herself in danger — she wasn't *crazy*. But every day they waited, more of their soldiers were fighting. Fighting and sometimes dying. Adding a dragon to their forces would be a huge advantage. She couldn't understand what they were waiting for.

The past couple of months had been an adjustment for everyone, but she thought that the soldiers were getting a bit more used to having a dragon in their midst. They had already been used to seeing him around the castle, but that was different from seeing him up close. Or from being expected to ride on his back, which Captain Varyn had required most of them to practice (with Meg's assistance) at least a few times. And a few days ago, he'd had Jakl practice plucking soldiers from the ground and flying short distances with them dangling from his claws.



That had been kind of fun. Well, not for the soldiers, probably. But Jakl had enjoyed it.

The best thing about training was that it helped her not think about other things. Like, for example, her supposed best friend, who had abandoned her and gone flying off with their very evil and terrible enemy for reasons no one could begin to understand.

But she had to let herself think about him sometimes. Because she had to find him. She had to find him and get him back home, where he belonged.

Captain Varyn dismissed them for the day, and Meg sent Jakl off to nap and get something to eat. She wanted him rested and fed and ready for later. She was going to do something very foolish. She didn't want either of them to be tired, or distracted by an empty stomach.

She gave her practice armor to Devan, who smiled shyly at her and gave her a quick little half-bow when she thanked him, as he always did. She smiled back and then shook her head at him as he jogged away. Sometimes she thought the soldiers were almost as perplexed by her presence as they were by Jakl's. There weren't any other women in their ranks, let alone princesses. For the most part they seemed to have settled on sort of intentionally forgetting that she was a princess during training, which suited Meg just fine—it wouldn't do for anyone to



waste time trying to be polite and deferential to her in the middle of a battle! But once training was over, they remembered again and had trouble figuring out how to behave. She trusted they'd get it all sorted out eventually.

Pela, ever the perfect lady-in-waiting, was standing patiently beside the castle steps, today's stack of important papers in hand. She gave Meg a summary as they walked inside.

"I have the latest reports on the war; your parents want you to be prepared to discuss them at breakfast tomorrow morning. There's the usual pile of petition letters and"—she gave Meg a sympathetic glance before continuing—"your history tutor sent over a new list of reading assignments."

Meg made a very unprincess-like face. Her parents had agreed to cut back on her lessons during the current crisis, but not to stop them entirely. Meg usually liked history, but although she understood her tutor's inclination to shift their current focus to studying other wars and conflicts, she was getting a little tired of endless reading about death and destruction throughout the world's past. There was more than enough of that happening right here in the present.

Pela went on, relaying a few more notes and messages, but as soon as Meg's door closed behind them, she



dropped the hand holding the list and looked at Meg beseechingly.

“Princess, this plan is very foolish.”

Meg sighed. “I know, Pela.”

“Are you certain you will not reconsider?”

“Yes, I’m certain.”

Pela nodded, but managed to convey a vast amount of disapproval along with the acceptance. “Very well. In that case, I have laid out your clothing and arranged for your evening meal to be brought up to your rooms.”

“Thank you,” Meg said. And she meant it. She wasn’t sure how she would have gotten through the past several weeks without Pela’s quiet, able assistance. And kindness.

“Please — just be careful,” Pela added.

“I will. I promise.”

Pela’s mouth twitched in a very interesting manner, but she had it back under control again so quickly that Meg couldn’t really be sure what she had seen. She presumed, however, that Pela did not quite believe that Meg was capable of being careful.

It was probably not such an unreasonable opinion.

Pela helped her change out of her training clothes and then ducked back out, leaving Meg to spend the remainder of the afternoon going through the letters and other documents that her parents had sent for her to



read. Training to fight in the war was one thing, but they still expected her to keep up with her responsibilities as the princess-heir as well. Meg understood, but she wished that the news weren't so uniformly grim and discouraging. Lourin and its allies were advancing steadily, and every day brought more reports of Trelian's soldiers falling back. They were outnumbered, waiting on reinforcements from Kragmir that hadn't yet arrived, and they were losing ground. Meg knew that her father had still not abandoned all hope of negotiating an end to the fighting, but she didn't think it was likely to happen. Meg suspected that lingering hope was the main reason she and Jakl hadn't yet been allowed to join the war effort. She thought they had waited long enough, but it wasn't her decision to make. She had her orders, and currently those orders were to continue training and nothing more.

And you always follow orders, do you?

Meg tried to ignore that voice she kept hearing in her head. The one that pointed out how her current plan was a direct violation of everything she had promised her parents about being more responsible and less impulsive and able to follow orders and do what she was told.

It's not impulsive, she told herself. I've given it a great deal of thought. That was true. But somehow she didn't think that really made much difference. She knew, she



knew it was almost certainly the wrong thing to do. But she didn't know what choice she had. Mage Serek refused to do anything. She'd pestered him relentlessly, cajoling, pleading, demanding, screaming . . . until he had finally banished her from his quarters entirely. Banished her! For trying to make him do what he should have been doing anyway. Well, if he wasn't going to try to find Calen, then she would just do it herself.

Even though you know it's a terrible idea, the smarter, more responsible part of her added silently. That part always sounded a little like her older sister Maerlie. Maerlie, who was far away in Kragmir, married to the prince there and far more sensible in every way than Meg. Meg missed her terribly. Having Calen in her life had helped her not feel Maerlie's absence quite so strongly after she left. But now she had neither one.

"That's what I'm trying to fix," she said out loud. She didn't know if it was worse to have conversations with yourself out loud or silently inside your own head. Either way, she didn't want to listen. She'd made her decision. And it wasn't really *that* much of a risk. She would be careful. She'd take Jakl up so high that there would be no danger of being spotted by enemy soldiers. She just had to start looking. Jakl's eyes were sharp; he'd be able to see even from a great distance. So they'd start going out and



looking for signs of where Calen might have gone. And once she found him, she could start figuring out how to get there, to bring him home. It would all depend on where he was, she supposed.

And whether he wants to come back, that voice in her head said.

Of course he wants to come back! Meg closed her eyes. She had to stop arguing with herself this way. She was beginning to worry about her sanity.

She made herself focus on her work, and for a while she succeeded. But then there were no more papers left to read, no more summaries or responses left to write. She sat by the window and thought about Calen until it was time to go.

“There,” Pela said, tying off the last of the laces that cinched Meg’s boots tightly around her calves. She rose and stepped back, looking pleased at her work. And it *was* her work; Pela had decided that Meg needed a whole wardrobe of riding clothes now that she would be out in public on her dragon so much of the time. Meg had left her to it, which she was discovering was usually the smart thing to do when Pela had her mind set on something. The result was an impressive array of outfits that were practical, comfortable, and somehow still very



flattering, despite being mostly variations of tunics and trousers. There were even a few fancy-dress versions, “in case you’re ever riding Jakl as part of a ceremony or formal event,” Pela had explained at Meg’s incredulous reaction. Those were really very lovely. She almost hoped that she had an occasion to wear one sometime.

The one Pela had selected today was what Meg secretly thought of as the thief-in-the-night outfit. She had no doubt Pela had had it made with just this sort of sneaking around in mind. Pela didn’t approve, not remotely, but apparently she also didn’t expect that Meg would always listen to reason. So she had provided at least one set of clothing in which Meg could sneak around in style. There were long tapered sleeves that wouldn’t catch on Jakl’s occasional rough scales, and clever leather pieces set along the inner thighs and calves that helped keep Meg firmly in place on Jakl’s back. There were even matching black leather gloves and a black hood to hold and conceal Meg’s long blond hair.

“Now we must get you outside without incident,” Pela said briskly. It was late, but there were always servants about, and some of them wouldn’t hesitate to inform the king and queen if they saw Meg stealing out for what could not possibly be any good reason at this



time of night. Pela preceded Meg down the halls, checking around corners and making sure the way was clear, until they reached Jakl's paddock. Jakl, of course, was ready and waiting, eager to go. He was always up for flying, especially at night, but Meg thought that he was also eager to help find Calen. Jakl knew how much Meg wanted to find him. And she thought that the dragon had come to love Calen in his own way, too.

Meg turned to thank Pela once more for her help, but Pela brushed her words aside. "It's my pleasure to assist you, Princess. You know that. Now, be swift, and do what you must do, and come back safely."

Meg nodded and was about to climb up onto her dragon's back when she heard what sounded like a strangled squeak behind her.

She turned back around. "Pela, was that —?"

Meg's words died in her throat.

Pela was standing frozen on the path. She'd only taken a couple of steps before finding her way blocked by the dark figure standing before her.

It was Mage Serek.

He was standing right in front of Pela, but his attention was fixed on Meg. His eyes were alight with anger.

Meg stared back at him defiantly. He was *not* going to stop her.



She waited for him to shout at her, but for a long moment he didn't say anything at all. When he finally spoke, his voice was eerily calm. "What exactly do you think you are about to do?"

"I'm going to find Calen."

He uttered a harsh laugh. "You're going to find Calen. You're just going to fly off on your dragon and *look* for him?"

"Yes!" she said back angrily, practically spitting the word at him. "*Someone* has to."

"And you think you're just going to look down and see him standing there, waiting for you to come rescue him?"

The contempt in his voice was very irritating.

"Mage Krelig has a hundred giant disgusting slaarh," Meg said. "Do you think they will be hard to spot?"

Serek shook his head. "Do you not quite grasp the size of the world we live in, Your Highness? What are the chances that you're just going to happen upon the place where Krelig is hiding?"

"Small," Meg conceded hotly. "But better than nothing. And I'll take any chance over no chance. I don't care how long it takes, how many nights I have to spend —"

"How much you risk yourself and your kingdom in the process," Serek added.



Meg flinched inwardly. She didn't like to think about that part.

"You're not stopping me," she said instead. She climbed the rest of the way up to Jakl's back.

"Get down from there, idiot child!" Serek snapped. He sprinted toward her, nearly trampling poor Pela.

Jakl whipped his head down, snarling, knocking the mage to the ground. Serek twisted around to face her, but he didn't try to get up. Jakl was still growling ominously, head lowered, his eyes fixed on Serek's.

"Careful, Mage Serek," Meg said softly. "Jakl knows exactly how important this is to me."

"As do I," Serek said, his voice controlled again, despite the dragon staring him in the face. "But this is not the way."

Meg looked at him, a thought occurring to her. "How did you even know that I'd be out here? Have you been *spying* on me?" She didn't suspect Pela for a second. Pela might try her best to discourage Meg from doing stupid things, but she would never betray her.

"No," he said. "I thought you had more sense than to try something this foolish and dangerous. Clearly I was wrong. Anders had a vision."

Meg wasn't sure whether she wanted to laugh or cry. "Anders had a vision about *this*? Why can't his



gods-cursed glimmers show him something useful, like where Calen is, or how we can defeat Lourin, or —?”

“You know he can’t control what he sees,” Serek said. “Although I disagree that this one wasn’t useful. At least I got out here in time to stop you.”

Now Meg did laugh. “You’re not stopping me,” she said again.

“Princess, be reasonable! You can’t possibly —”

Meg narrowed her eyes at him. “You don’t get to tell me what to do. You’ve given up on him. I have not. I’m going to find him and prove to you exactly how wrong you are. About everything.”

“Princess —”

“If you stay very still, Jakl probably won’t crush you.” *Let’s go*, she thought at her dragon. She was done listening to Serek.

Jakl launched himself upward. Meg spared one glance back for the mage, who was still on the ground, staring after her. And then she turned back around and closed her eyes and let herself get lost in the flying.

Not for too long, though. It was tempting to just let go and feel the wind and the night and not think about anything, but she had a job to do.

From the dismal reports, Meg knew some of what she would see before she opened her eyes, but it was still



a shock. The damage stretched farther than she'd imagined. Empty husks of buildings littered the landscape everywhere she looked. Farms had been burned, roads destroyed, and people killed, although she hoped that most of them had gotten to safety before Lourin's army had arrived. Many of them had taken shelter within the outer walls surrounding the castle, in lands set aside for exactly this kind of emergency. But not all of them. Some didn't want to abandon their homes. Some wanted to stay and fight to stop the enemy soldiers from destroying what they'd spent their lives building. And some had surely been murdered by Lourin soldiers for their trouble. She tried not to picture Trelian's people — *her* people — falling and dying at the hands of the enemy. Innocent people, caught up in a war that should never even have started.

That was the worst part of all. Everything — all the blood and death and pain and destruction — it didn't mean anything. It was all so *stupid* — they weren't even fighting about anything real!

Lourin had attacked because Trelian had violated its promise to keep its dragon (*her dragon*) safely contained and on the ground. But her parents had explained to King Gerald a million times why they'd had to break that promise, and anyway, the whole reason for the original



promise was meaningless, since it was based on Sen Eva's lies about Jakl and his supposed attacks. But even though Sen Eva was dead now, her evil influence was still hurting Trelian. King Gerald didn't believe them, or didn't care, or both, and he wouldn't respond to their repeated pleas for talks. He'd persuaded the leaders of his neighbor kingdoms, Baustern and Farrell-Grast, to join him, and as Meg knew all too well from those cursed reports, things were going very, very badly for Trelian at the moment.

But not for long. The Kragmir soldiers would soon arrive, and that would turn the tide. That, and whenever they finally let Meg and Jakl do something more than train.

She stared down at the ruined countryside and felt angry tears trying to squeeze out of her eyes.

How had everything become such a disaster?

One problem at a time, she told herself. Right now, she was looking for Calen. But the more she surveyed the lands around her, the more ridiculous her entire plan seemed. Serek was right, of course. The world was a very big place. And at present it was filled with fighting and fires and danger and enemies, and she should *not* be flying around waiting for someone to see her and attack. And Calen could be anywhere. *Anywhere.* She knew that. She just . . . she just felt like she should be able to



find him. By force of will alone, she should be able to tell where he was.

But she couldn't. She realized that some part of her had thought she would get up here and just have a sense of where to go. But clearly she just didn't have any sense at all.

They flew on a while longer, but nothing changed.

We should go back, she thought at Jakl.

He turned without the faintest hint of surprise. He'd been feeling her feelings this whole time. He probably had known that she would give up before she knew it herself.

She wondered if Serek would be waiting for her. She wondered if he'd told her parents. Maybe they'd all be waiting there for her together. To tell her how foolish and careless she had been.

I know that already.

But when they reached the field by Jakl's paddock, it was Mage Anders who was waiting.

Jakl landed, but Meg stayed on his back.

"Hello, Anders," she said as neutrally as she could.

"Hello, Princess." He nodded at her clothing. "That's a really good sneaking-around outfit. Not suspicious at all."



Meg rolled her eyes. “Did Serek send you?”

“Not exactly. Although he is the reason I’m here. Well, one of the reasons.” He waited a moment, seemed to realize she wasn’t going to come down just yet, then looked around and found a nearby rock to sit on. “Well,” he continued, “how did it go? I don’t suppose you found Calen?”

“No.”

“Ah, well. I was rooting for you. But I do agree with Serek that it was probably not the best plan.”

“It’s better than no plan!”

He considered. “Maybe. Maybe not. A bad plan could actually make things worse instead of better, you know. But in any case, what if there were another plan? One that might have a better chance of success?”

She looked at him sharply. “You have another plan?”

“Yes!” he said. “It’s a good one, too. My idea, you know.”

“But you — you didn’t believe —”

“I don’t think Calen’s a traitor,” he said. “Neither does Serek.”

“Yes, he does,” Meg said bitterly.

“He thought Calen was a *risk*, as did I, but I don’t think he ever truly believed that Calen wanted to join Mage Krelig. And he’s still a risk, but I think he’s less



risky here with us than if we leave him in Krelig's hands. Once we get him back, we can figure out whether he's dangerous or not. But first we have to get him back. Serek and I are in agreement on that point."

"He's not dangerous!" Meg said, a little more loudly than she'd intended. "And why didn't Serek *say* he had a plan?"

"I think he was working up to it when your dragon knocked him down and you flew away."

Meg shook her head. "Well, he should have gotten to the point more quickly. He knows I don't have a lot of patience."

"True," Anders agreed.

They were silent for a moment.

"So what's this idea?" she asked at last.

"Come and we'll show you," he said, getting to his feet.

Meg hesitated a few seconds more, then slid down from Jakl's back. "If this is a trick, I'll let Jakl eat you," she said.

"As you wish," Anders said amiably. "But it's not a trick. We need your help to make it work."

She was about to ask what kind of help he meant when Pela burst into the clearing, having clearly run all the way up the path from the castle.



“Princess!” she said breathlessly. “I’m sorry! I didn’t expect you back so soon! I would have been here to meet you!” She looked at Anders in obvious confusion.

“It’s all right, Pela,” Meg said. “Come with us, and I’ll explain on the way.”

Pela nodded, then stepped into place beside Meg. They followed Mage Anders back into the castle.

Serek’s study was full of birds.

Well, maybe not *entirely* full of birds, but it had already been crammed with books and strange objects and containers and things, and now every remaining available bit of space seemed to have been taken over by big, black, noisy crows in wire cages.

“Um,” Meg said.

“I’ll explain in a moment,” Anders told her.

Serek, who was sitting at his desk, looked up as they came in. “Princess,” he said evenly.

“Mage Serek,” she said back, in the same careful tone.

“Oh, stop it, you two,” Anders said. “We’re all on the same team!” He walked over to one of the cages and leaned over to peer inside. “Isn’t that right?” he asked the bird looking back at him.

Pela smiled. “Who’s your friend, Mage Anders?”

“I call this one Blackie,” he answered, giving the cage



a little pat. “Actually, I call most of them Blackie. It’s hard to tell them apart. Except that one over there with the one white feather on his wing, I call that one George.”

“Let’s get started,” Serek said. He gestured toward a small table surrounded by four wooden chairs. “Princess, would you sit?”

If Mage Serek was going to act like their altercation in the field had never happened, Meg decided she could do the same. She took one of the chairs, and after a moment Pela sat in the one to her left. Serek took the one across from her.

“Are you going to do the kind of spell that you and Calen used to find Maurel when she was lost?” Come to think of it, why in the world hadn’t they done that sooner? But Serek was shaking his head.

“Krelig will have protected himself against any straightforward location spells. Remember, Sen Eva *wanted* us to find Maurel that time. Krelig . . . I do not think he is ready to be found. We believe he needs some time to prepare for his next move. And to try and get from Calen whatever it is he expects to get.”

“Do you have any idea what his next move will be?” Meg asked. “Or—or what it is he wants from Calen?”

Serek and Anders exchanged a look.



“We expect him to attack the Magistratum in some way,” Serek said.

“What’s left of it, anyway,” Anders put in. He made a face. “It’s kind of a mess at this point.”

Serek closed his eyes briefly in a way that somehow clearly suggested he was praying for patience. “We don’t know what form that attack will take, however. And he’ll probably attempt to win over as many of us to his side as possible first.”

Pela uttered a nervous little laugh. “But — but surely the other mages would not . . .” She trailed off, looking back and forth at their somber faces.

“There are many who do not believe we can successfully stand against him,” Serek said. “Some of those might decide to join him rather than die fighting him. More than some, perhaps.”

“But that’s cowardly!” Pela exclaimed.

“Yes,” Anders agreed. “But still true. Mages aren’t soldiers, Miss Pela. There’s no requirement for bravery. Or good character, or sense, or intelligence . . .” He paused a minute, then continued: “Or pleasant appearances, or tact, or taste, or good grooming habits —”

“Or patience,” Serek said, closing his eyes again.

“All mages have to be is good at magic,” Anders went on. “Good at magic and able to follow the rules. And



there are plenty who struggle with that second part. And if Mage Krelig wants to throw all the rules away . . . that's going to be pretty appealing to certain among us."

Pela just shook her head, clearly dismayed.

"And Calen?" Meg prompted.

"You know that Calen has some very special abilities," Serek said. "Mage Krelig no doubt seeks to use those abilities for his own ends. If enough of us do stand against him, I believe we can win. But if Calen's talent gives him an extra advantage . . ."

"But Calen wouldn't really help him!" Meg said, exasperated. *He wouldn't*. "He must just be . . . he must just be pretending. . ."

"Maybe," Serek said, then held up his hands in response to Meg's darkening expression and added, "Probably. Almost certainly. But Mage Krelig can be . . . very persuasive. He persuaded Calen to go along with him in the first place, didn't he? Who's to say he won't have ways to ensure Calen's continued cooperation?"

"But —"

"I don't believe Calen *wants* to help him. I don't believe Calen is a traitor. But do I believe that he might be caught up in something bigger than he can handle? Do I believe he might not be able to avoid helping Krelig in the end? Yes, I think those things are possible."



Meg clenched her fists. “But —”

“Which is why,” Serek broke in, “I think we need to find him and do everything we can to get him back. Soon.”

Meg forced herself to take a few deep breaths. *Calm down*, she told herself. *He wants to help, so just calm down and listen.*

“All right,” she said at last. “So how do we do that?”

“Magic!” Anders said, spreading his hands wide on either side of his head and waving them around dramatically.

Everyone ignored him.

“As I said,” Serek went on, “Krelig will be protected against any standard sort of location spell. So we’ve been trying to come up with alternatives that are more . . .”

“Sneaky,” Anders put in.

Serek paused, then conceded, “Well, yes. More sneaky. Something he won’t have anticipated or prepared against. And we think we have found a good approach.”

“It was my idea,” Anders reminded them.

Meg looked around the crowded study doubtfully. “You’re going to attack him with birds?”

“We’re going to use the birds to find Calen and try to communicate with him.”

Meg blinked. “You can do that?”



“Magic!” Anders whispered, waving his hands around again.

“We think so,” Serek said. “We believe that if we can infuse the birds with a strong enough sense of who Calen is and — most important — a strong enough desire to find him, they’ll be drawn to wherever he is. And once they find him, be able to give him a message. At least to let him know that we are looking for him, and that we want to bring him home.”

Meg didn’t quite understand the infusing part, but the rest of it sounded . . . well, it sounded a lot more promising than her plan of going out every night and having Jakl scan the ground for signs below them. “But how can I help with that? I can’t do any magic.” She glanced at Anders and waved her hands in the air experimentally. He grinned at her.

Serek rolled his eyes. “Don’t encourage him.” Then he looked at her seriously, leaning forward across the table. “You can help because you know Calen better than anyone. And . . .” He hesitated, seeming to search for just the right words. “Ability is important in magic,” he said at last. “Ability and power and knowledge: all of those are essential. But the most essential part of casting any spell is intention. Desire. The force of will that drives the magic to do what you want it to do. As much as I want



to bring Calen home — and I do sincerely want that, very much — I think it is safe to say that no one wants to bring him back home more than you.”

Meg swallowed, feeling suddenly on the verge of tears. Serek was certainly right about that last part. She nodded, not quite trusting herself to speak. Pela reached over and took her hand under the table. Meg squeezed it gratefully.

Serek held her eyes a moment more, then sat back, apparently satisfied. He gestured to Anders, who turned and opened up the cage beside him. The crow *quorked* quietly and fluttered its wings a little, but otherwise seemed undisturbed by the sudden attention. Anders held it gently with both hands and carried it over to them, then placed it in the center of the table. The crow tilted its head and regarded Anders silently from its new location.

“Blackie seems to like you,” Pela murmured, smiling.

Anders blinked at her, seeming surprised. “Of course he does. Everyone likes me.”

Pela laughed, and for once Meg appreciated Anders’s strange good humor. She looked back at Serek, feeling more or less back in control of herself.

“All right,” she said. “How do we begin?”



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