

Chapter 1

Greylen, a Teller of Tales, his guitar in hand, paused near the open door inside the Great Hall. Famous for his accuracy broad-casting news, he relished the honor bestowed upon him as a member of the select group of performers summoned to Megara to entertain King Cadamire, ruler over all the cities in Dana, on his 40th birthday. The din of cordial laughter and congenial conversation promised a receptive audience. This performance could open many doors. If the gods smiled on him and his act enthralled his audience, a wealthy noble might employ him to entertain the household during the long winter evenings. True, he had an offer for a position in another city, but only from a lord rumored out of favor to the King's court.

Patronage from one of the great houses guaranteed an easy life until spring. When the roads once more allowed travel, he and the other members of his profession roamed throughout Dana gathering material for their stories. Old enough to appreciate a warm bed and a roof over his head during the cold months and young enough to handle the dangers of traveling between cities. Greylen stood at the pinnacle of his career.

Delighted that the King's Candle Lighters outdid themselves when they set up the illumination, Greylen searched for the table reserved for the entertainers. Candlelight flickered from chandeliers evenly spaced in rows across the Great Hall. Candelabra arranged artistically on long tables cast a warm glow on dark hair, dark eyes, tan skin men, women and children. White linen cloths disguised long wide planks supported by trestles into festive tables. Benches moved from the Throne Room supplied temporary seating.

Late comers rushed by him in a forlorn hope that somewhere in the crowded room they would find a vacant seat. Stragglers, mostly farmers from the sixth ring lounged on the floor along the sides of the room. The closer one sat to the King's dais, the higher position he held in Megara. All the men at these select tables wore elegant bright color tunics over tight fitting hose, while their ladies dressed in flowing gowns the colors of the rainbow. Rich, poor, old, young attended, representing every ring of the city.

Having pinpointed the entertainer's table at the left side of the king's dais, Greylen squeezed and shuffled his way through the hall. He sidestepped one of the many young women pouring vintage wine into ceramic mugs and placed his instrument in a guitar stand near the head table before taking his seat.

A fanfare of trumpets announced King Cadamire's arrival. A circlet of gold holding a blood-red garnet set between two bronze eagles crowned his black hair showing the first signs of gray. A green velvet cape flowed over his shoulders and enhanced his golden tunic and forest green hose as he graciously acknowledged the cheers that threatened to shake the chandeliers off the ceiling. The King's guard, in their elegant black and scarlet dress uniforms accompanied him.

Greysten frowned and poked the man next to him. "Who's the current captain? Tiren held the honor last time I visited."

"Captain Bart, Son of Bromwell. His father is overlord of Delmarath, and Advisor to the King," was the answer. "Might explain his rise over more deserving men, like Buris of Chaleen." The last statement was barely audible.

Prince Conder, several years' younger than Cadamire, rose from his seat and held his brother's chair. The crowd resumed their enthusiastic noise.

"Our Prince outshines the King," a woman whispered to her daughter.

"Look at the cut of his tunic," the girl answered.

"Length of men's tunics must be shorter in Chaleen, than here." Her mother glanced at her neighbors.

"It shows his leg to good advantage," the girl persisted. "Hope that style takes on in Megara."

The Prince waited until the crowd quieted to raise the first toast of the evening. "I give you my brother, Cadamire, King of Dana, ruler of all the land from the Citherian Mountains to the great river, from the southern wilderness to the endless swamp. Let his reign be as long as it has been prosperous. May he find the same favor for the next four decades as he enjoys today. The love of his people forever!" Benches scraped the floor as men and women raised their mugs to honor their king sitting above them on a raised platform.

Before anyone could sit, Lord Bromwell, Overlord of Delmarath and the King's Advisor gave his own toast. "All cheer our Lord and King. Never has Dana been so well governed." Shouts of appreciation followed these words.

"Black tunic and hose, red cape; aren't they Delmarath's colors?" Greysten set his drink on the table.

His neighbor nodded. "Bromwell always goes formal for affairs like this. Likes to let people know how high a border lord can rise."

King Cadamire acknowledged both toasts with a raise of his hand. The hall quieted immediately. "I thank my brother, Conder and my adviser, Lord Bromwell for their grand wishes. I prize you, my people, your love and devotion beyond words. But, this is not the occasion for speeches. Let the meal begin!"

Greysten helped himself to slices of roast beef, stewed mutton, and stuffed duck. Careful to use only the thumb and third finger to lift the meat to his mouth, he piled baked beans, squash and potatoes on a thick slice of bread. Using his knife, he cut the bread into

squares and was pleased that he managed to eat without losing the vegetables from the open sandwich. The same young women who poured the wine now brought small bowls of water so people could wash their hands. While the nobles used white pieces of linen for the purpose, Greylen dried his hands on his pants. Baskets loaded with apples, pears, and grapes followed the main course. Too much meat and vegetables overfilled his stomach, so he grabbed several pieces of fruit and stealthily slipped them into a pouch on his belt.

A flourish of trumpets announced the head cook who set the birthday cake, a three-tiered affair stuffed with raisins, and nuts, glazed with the head cook's renowned honey syrup, before the King. Cook's helpers followed with flat cakes of the same recipe. They placed one on each table and served those sitting along the walls. Greylen thought his piece rather small.

With dinner over, the people's attention turned to the entertainers who quickly quaffed their last mugs of wine.

"Greylen's here," someone commented. "We'll listen to some good songs tonight."

"Still wearing his coat of many patches," another said.

"Think he'll ever get a new one?" a woman asked.

Greylen grinned. At one time, he considered his tattered cloak a matter of embarrassment, but as patches gradually replaced material, he found that it made him unique and recognizable with or without the patronage of a noble family.

Prince Conder who organized this part of the banquet rose to his feet. "Now that everyone has had his fill of good food, let the entertainment begin."

The people cheered and then settled down to listen to ballads of world-shattering battles and brave heroes. Ditties of news from all parts of the kingdom delighted the adults as well as the children. Songs of unrequited love and maidens in distress moved the ladies to tears. Greylen felt honored to be last on the program and relished critiquing the efforts of lesser-known performers as he waited.

Hearing his introduction by Prince Conder, Greylen took his guitar and bowed first to the king, then to the tables of nobles and last to the common folk. His first two songs received an enthusiastic response from his audience. As he sang his last song, a romantic ballad about the beautiful Elana and an unknown lord, he sensed a chill creeping over the room.

That Elana, the tavern maid who waited on tables at Stallion's Inn, mooned over one of the great ones was true enough, but Greylen didn't like the look the King's brother gave him when he concluded with the refrain. Polite unenthusiastic applause rewarded his efforts. The whispering that followed unnerved him. Cold stares and averted faces spelled

trouble. Greylen forced him-self to bow, smile, and walk nonchalantly out of the Great Hall.

Gilmore, the wizard's apprentice intercepted him in the corridor. "Greylen, you fool, you managed to toddle into a rattler's nest." Gilmore lowered his voice, his round honest face full of concern. "I'd inquire about safer sleeping quarters if I were you. And soon, perhaps someplace other than Megara." He indicated a group of nobles with a slight movement of his head. "Could be dangerous," he mouthed. "Go." The wizard's apprentice vanished into the crowd shuffling toward the main gate leading into the city.

Greylen headed for a dimly lit corridor, hoping it was the one he used earlier that evening. He needed to collect his meager belongings that he left in the common room, which furnished accommodations for low ranking visitors. *This isn't supposed to happen to a veteran performer, he stewed. It's surreal, unbelievable. This evening, everyone recognized me as the best in my profession. Now, I'm a fugitive. What drove me to attempt fiction? I'm a newscaster, not a ballad maker. I tell events as they happen. I don't invent them. Never imagined I needed to check the facts for a yarn that isn't real.*

He wandered some distance before he realized he was lost. Choking back panic, he moused through endless gloomy passageways until he found a stairway. He groped his way to the lower level. Loud snoring led him to a dormitory and the bed assigned to him. No one woke as he collected his possessions.

Staff in his hand, his guitar slung over his pack, he sneaked across the courtyard and through the gate. He shivered. His multicolored patched cloak barely protected him from the sharp autumn wind. *No matter, I'll feel warm once I start moving. I must leave the city before dawn.* He held his breath waiting for someone to challenge him. A man leaving the castle at this time of night would be subject to questioning and Greylen couldn't think of a feasible excuse for his midnight departure.

He exhaled heavily as he studied the bridge over the moat. Moonbeams flooded the wooden structure and danced on the black water beneath it. Where were the guards? Anyone walking on the ramparts would notice him outside the palace. He thought a moment. Yes, places existed where a man could escape unseen in friendly shadows if one knew how to swim. Greylen didn't know how to swim. The water would ruin his guitar.

He checked the brooding palace walls. No lights flickered from the windows. No torches blazed from the top of the ramparts. He inched toward the bridge, every nerve alerted for sounds of pursuit. A cricket chirped as if in protest of the falling temperature. Below him in the city a dog howled. *Move you fool!* Greylen sprinted; positive that his feet pounding on the wooden boards would wake the wizard high in his tower.

Once across the moat, Greylen fled down the moonlit road into the welcomed darkness of the sleeping city. The soaring stone houses of the nobles, backed one against another, clung to the side of the hill. Honest citizens still slept and would sleep until the sun rose.

His pounding heart and gasping lungs forced him to stop and seize several mouthfuls of air. *Can't stay on the road. Moon's too bright.*

He collapsed on the step of a noble's house. The castle clock chimed the hour in a deep resounding tone. "One," he counted aloud. "Two— three— that's the third hour after midnight. It's later than I figured. Oh—" He rested his hand on his thumping heart. "Am I stupid! I should have asked someone how to get to my quarters. Hallways in the palace twist in the most unpredictable patterns. It's normal for visitors to ask for directions. It would have saved me hours." He wiped the sweat off his forehead.

When his heartbeat slowed to its normal pace and he could breathe easily again, he concentrated on his safest options for leaving Megara. Function and need designed the capital, typical of most Danian cities. The palace perched on the top of the hill enclosed by its own walls and a moat. The lords flourished in homes encircling the palace, protected by the original fortification of the city known as the first ring. As the population grew, the area be-came too small to contain the inhabitants, so residents built homes outside the city and a second barrier for protection. Now, Megara boasted of six rings of houses, each ring fenced by a massive stone wall.

"Curse that harvest moon," Greylen muttered as he surveyed the cobblestone road. "Better stay in the shadows next to the houses. Take me longer, but I have a couple of hours to reach the city gates before dawn and it's downhill all the way."

The blackness that cloaked him also concealed that no one worried about thieves. Why should they? Anyone convicted of stealing paid for his crime with the removal of his right hand. Greylen tiptoed his way across tiny yards avoiding stairs, window wells, children's toys and flowerpots.

So far, so good. Gaining confidence, he increased his speed and stumbled over the handle of a spade. Stretching out his hands to break his fall, he scraped his knees on a gravel path. Something soft and goeey squished through his fingers and into his nails. An unmistakable odor assailed his nostrils. *Dog shit.*

Gritting his teeth to prevent yelling at this outrage, he struggled to his feet and bumped a cart filled with firewood. The guitar banged against the house. It thundered with a hollow echo as the wood clattered to the ground. His tattered cloak ripped in yet another place. His knees quaked, his heart hammered, he hoped he didn't break his guitar.

"Who's out there?" a woman screeched.

Greylen squatted under a leafless bush praying she didn't look down.

"Go to sleep. It must be a rat," a man grumbled. A dog barked in the distance. The window above him slammed.

Silence recaptured the sullen menacing city. Wind rustled the last leaves on stunted trees. Greylen crawled onto the cobblestones and scrambled to his feet. He raised his arm to rub the sweat off his forehead. The offensive odor on his hand floated through his nose, down his esophagus and turned his stomach sour. Clamping his jaws tightly together to prevent gagging, he knelt and rubbed his hands in the gravel and dry leaves on the side of the road. This removed some of the heavy stuff, but didn't stop his hand from stinking. His hands were his means to earn a living. He had to find some water. Every ring of the city sported at least one fountain near the gate leading into the next ring.

"I'll have to use the road," he said as he peered into the night toward the castle. He saw no one. Feeling conspicuous, he edged along the side of the street avoiding the uneven ground where yard met cobblestone. Erupting liquid pattering on the surface of a nearby pool called to him.

Convincing himself there would be no pursuit, he stepped into the middle of the street. Again, he stopped and faced the direction of the palace, his eyes and ears strained for danger. "Nobody's there," he scolded himself. "If I keep this up, I'll give myself heart failure before daylight." He hurried toward the sound of splashing water.

Three flickering lights halted his progress. His stomach leaped into his throat. Not only did these torches block his way; they advanced toward him. He scurried off the road and flattened himself against a door. *It must be a guard at this late hour.* His heart thumped faster. He slipped along the front of the stone house, taking care not to bump into anything. *They're looking for me. No, that's not possible. They're coming from the wrong direction. Doesn't matter. They'll drag me to the palace for questioning. They'll recognize me.*

Surprised to find a narrow drainage ditch running between the edge of the house and the next building, he retreated into the cramped space until he huddled beyond the range of torchlight. A startled rat swept past his ankles and darted across the road. Greylen jumped, stifled a scream and then cursed his bad luck. Blackness shrouded the stone house opposite his hiding place. Nothing he could do but wait, fume and hope no one would notice him. Minutes seemed like hours. At this rate, he would never get out of Megara.

"Don't think about those men." His voice sounded loud, perhaps too loud. He drew a quick gulp of air. *I hope no one heard that. The quicker I get to Chaleen the better. Chaleen...* He swallowed. *True, Lord Buris offered me the position, but Buris is a cousin of Conder and the King. Did I really offend Prince Conder? He's ruler of the only city where I've been assured employment. He wrung his hands together. Is Chaleen safe for me?*

The guard's marching feet on the cobblestone pavement assaulted his ears. Clanging, creaking weapons brushing against leather, merged with the rhythmic beat of clicking heavy footsteps. Adrenaline intensified his heartbeat, and quickened the rise and fall of his chest. *If I'm captured, they'll kill me. That's what they'll do. They'll torture me first,*

standard procedure. His whole body stiffened. Three men carrying the torches tramped in front of his hiding place. What if they heard him breathe?

One of the men spoke to the others. They laughed.

They're not searching for anyone. Greylen relaxed enough to focus on the men. *Who are they? Not the city guard. They wear blue and brown. Those men belong to one of the Lords visiting the king. Looks like purple and gold, maybe maroon and white. They're moving too fast to be sure.*

The guardsmen's footsteps receded into the darkness. For a moment, Greylen leaned against the house breathing deeply. "Thank all the gods in the world they didn't see me," he sighed. The moon hovered over the palace tower. The clock struck four. "Got to get out of here."

Sounds of splashing water grew louder as he pressed down the hill. At last, he spied the fountain on a side street. He dipped his hands into the icy liquid and rubbed them together. After a moment, he jerked them out. His hands stung from the cold. He squinted critically at them, but the moon failed to lend him enough light to be certain. He shrugged then braced himself. The frigid water numbed his hands while he gave them second washing. "Enough," he mumbled backing away from the fountain. He shook off the water, stared at them then cautiously sniffed his fingers. Sighing with relief, he dried them on his wool pants as he backtracked to the main road. Near the third gate, he hesitated ready to jump back into the shadows.

The road remained empty. The moon disappeared from the sky. It struck him as a good omen. The clock in the tower chimed five times when he arrived at gate number four. The sky slowly grayed. Greylen quickened his pace to a running-walk. It took forever to reach gate number five. He panted heavily as he hurried past a long line of two and three-story buildings where the craftsmen resided. Small shops opened to the street, multiple families dwelled above them. A cock crowed as the teller of tales rushed through the sixth gate into an open marketplace.

The huge plaza, large enough to accommodate canvas booths and space for several wagons and teams to maneuver looked empty and forbidding without merchants and crowds engaged in daily shopping. Beyond this wide expanse, the road continued through three consecutive arches. The widest of the three faced the marketplace framing the second one; lower and narrower. Soon guards would control the traffic through the third arch, which restricted travel to one wagon at a time. Arrows shot from the top of these walls would drop a fugitive. A commanding officer might station men between the arches; invisible assassins thwarting entrance or escape.

Greylen thrust his shoulders back and raised his chin high. *No point in trying to hide now. Either the gate is guarded or it isn't.* He forced himself to walk casually across the open square and into the passage between two hulking fortifications. No one challenged him as

he stepped through the open gate. Peace enjoyed by generations rendered the watch careless.

“Greylen, wait!” someone shouted.