

**Ennead: Chapter One**  
**by Celia Hanson**



**A Sea of Gems**

I'd rather wrestle a slimy vitrephage than drag another sheet around a bed corner.

I steel myself with a breath and shove the triangle of linen under the mattress. Feather quills prick the back of my hand, and I want to rip my skin off. Thirty-two beds, one hundred and twenty-seven corners and the last one is always the worst.

Pull. Align. Flatten. Tuck.  
Lift. Crease. Press. Smooth.

My fingers trace the motions blindly, but I eye the angles anyway, just to be sure. Heavens forbid an unseen bedsheet hidden under the coverlet of a noble's bed not perfectly bisect the corner.

I haven't straightened said coverlet yet. It sits in a heap upon the carpet, like a puddle of untold luxury. The embroidered birds mock me. Colorful feathers like parrots, fanned out like peacocks. I don't even know their name. I suppose the educated noble who someday graces this empty bed would recognize them. Though I doubt they would take notice.

I push off my knees and stand up stiffly. Pale gold afternoon light peeks through the small windows. Through the ripples, I spy a rambunctious breeze tousling the leaves. If I swung the casement open just an inch, I'm sure I would smell the crisp of Autumn upon it.

I cast a disparaging look at the pile of coverlet. *Don't judge me nameless birds. You too would seek the breeze.* I leave them in disgrace and step around it towards the window.

I check over my shoulder, and the doorway is empty and the hall is quiet. I slowly lift the iron latch and nudge the window open. My shoulders relax.

The sound of birds. The smell of forest. The cold freshness of wild wind.

I close my eyes and let it wash over me.

I lean closer to the windowpane, my breath fogging the glass. From the castle's position on a tall hill, the Peridot Forest unfurls in every direction. Rubies glitter at the throat of every maple. Topaz and garnet sparkle where the sun catches the birches, and the oaks wear crowns of beaten gold.

If I were a tree, I would not waste a day like this just standing there. I would lift my skirts and twirl.

I'm already twirling in my head. Not in this scratchy gray uniform, of course. I brush my fingers along the green velvet drapes. An emerald gown with a brocade bodice. A crown of autumn leaves to distract from my dirt brown hair.

The sun's edge dips below the tree line and the leaves flare brighter. Copper. Amber. A wash of red against the sky like the trees have caught fire.

Like the trees have caught fire.

My eyes lock on the brocade pattern of the curtains. Each vine twisting into the next. Breathe in. Breathe out. I traced one curl with my finger. Then the next. Then the next.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

"Daydreaming again, Miss Nell?"

I jump so hard my hip slams into the windowsill. Mrs. Goverson stands in the doorway with her arms crossed and eyebrows arched. Her eyes fixed on the coverlet that costs more than both our lives.

I spin around and give her my best smile. "When the leaves shine like a sea of gems, how can you not help but gaze upon them?"

Her scowl does not budge.

She has been dealing with me for three years now and is wise to all my moves. When we first arrived at the castle, I was a 14-year-old kid whose life had just fallen apart. I recall she cut me some slack for all of five minutes.

"Kitchen." She grumps at me.

"I was just taking a momentary breath in my—"

"Kitchen, Miss Nell." You can go gaze upon a sea of dishes."

Some people have no imagination. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from saying something that would make tomorrow worse. I lower my eyes and bob something that resembles a curtsy, grab the

soiled sheets, and walk out of the room with as much dignity a girl carrying an armful of someone else's dirty sheets can muster.

I trudge toward the servants' stairs and throw the sheets into the laundry chute.

The book on my nightstand will go unread tonight. I had been planning it all afternoon. Wash up. Curl into bed with the candle stub I had saved from last week. Read until my eyes gave out.

Instead, dishes.

A peal of giggling pulls me out of my self-pity. Isabella and Beatrice are huddled at the mouth of the corridor that leads toward the soldiers' barracks. Beatrice tucks a curl behind her ear with the deliberate slowness of a girl who knows she's being watched. Isabella twirls the end of her braid like it's a weapon.

Off to bat their eyelashes at the cadets, no doubt. I roll my eyes hard enough world goes black for a second.

I bump straight into a body.

I bounce back and catch my balance on the wall.

"Oh, I, I, I beg your pardon." The boy in front of me stammers like he just came in from a winter's walk. "Oh. Hi, Nell."

Whitebread Will.

A face and personality as memorable as a blank piece of paper. His orange hair is the only thing differentiating him from the plaster walls. He's gotten lanky over the summer, all elbows and Adam's apple, and now I must crane my neck to look at him. The indignity of it.

But an idea blooms in my head, and I rearrange my face into something warmer. Something that, if I'm being honest, looks a lot like the smile Beatrice had been practicing in the corridor. I can be coy. Watch me.

"Hi, Will." I tilt my head and bat my eyes. Twice. For good measure. "I was just on my way to the kitchens to do an extra shift on dishes. You wouldn't happen to be free to take over for me, would you? I would be ever so grateful."

Will opens his mouth. He closes it. He opens it again. My goodness, he looks like the fish in the courtyard pond.

"I, I would love to."

Yes. My book. My bed. Maybe even a pastry from the warming tray if Chef Hans was not looking. The whole quiet evening uncurling in front of me like a gift.

"But."

He swallows. My sweet mental image shatters. Tell me he has not grown a backbone now...

"But I can't, Nell. I'm on serving duty tonight. There's a delegation visiting, and they need extra hands in the dining room."

I let the smile fall and my face returns to normal.

Poor Will. He really would have taken the shift if he could. He's kind that way. Either kind or dim enough to scrub dishes for a girl who batted her eyelashes at him.

I pat his arm. "It's all right. Thanks anyway."

He nods so hard I worry for his neck, and I keep walking.

The smell of roasting meat greets me at the stairwell and follows me down. Rosemary. Garlic. Something rich and buttery that I would not be tasting tonight or any other night. Chef Hans's voice already booming up the corridor.

"Where are the potatoes! The leeks are burning! If that sauce is scorched, I will serve your—"

I did not need to hear what he was going to serve, or whose. I step through the doorway into the heat of the kitchen.

"Evening, Chef Hans."

"Nelly!" he barks without looking up from the saucepan he's lecturing. "Can't get enough of your sink, hm?"

It's been two years since I was promoted out of the kitchen, and Chef Hans still knows my face. There's a lesson in that somewhere, I just can't seem to learn it.

I roll up my sleeves and plunge my hands into water gray with grease. I start scrubbing and let my mind drift. Past the dishes. Past the kitchen. Past the castle walls, into the woods, where I'm dancing with the trees again. I'm a willow, flowing and graceful, drawing admiring eyes from every side of the ballroom. My partner is a hickory, strong and tall. He leads our dance with a firm hand. The branches become Gregor's arms. Even the fickle prince is awed by my poise and inspired to devotion. He leans in close, about to admit the secret obsession he has harbored since we first locked eyes three years ago, and—

"Not my gravy!"

A commotion at the doorway pulls my attention. My little brother Oakden walks in with Will behind him. Will's livery is streaked from chest to belt with a thick brown sauce.

Oakden is stifling a laugh. His lips are pursed and the round cherubic cheeks he's going to grow out of any minute now, are shaking with repressed mirth. I can't believe he's fourteen. I still remember him being five. Pulling him down from trees while he giggled, running through freezing streams shrieking as I splashed him, stroking his soft, brown curls until he fell asleep on his mat.

Chef Hans barrels toward Will to interrogate him about the gravy incident which I suspect involved Will tripping over his own feet.

"Order up!" the call comes again. The fine dishes for the delegation stack up along the wooden table in front of the hearth. Silver platters with domed covers destined for the royal dining room.

I try to shrink into the soap suds.

"Nelly!"

The voice still finds me. Of course it does.

"Grab the lamb and head up with Oakden. Main course needs to go up while it's hot."

I knew better than to argue. I dry my hands on a towel, walk to the table, and heft the wide platter. The silver dome traps the steam, but the smell of mint and thyme escapes anyway. My mouth is watering before I take a step.

Not that I know what it tastes like. None of us do.

Oakden is already halfway down the hallway by the time I clear the doorway. He has a tureen of potatoes in one hand and a dish of glazed carrots in the other. He carries them with the easy confidence of someone who had not, two years ago, dropped two rhubarb pies down the west staircase. I'm still taller than him, so I lengthen my stride and catch up.

We climb the servants' stairs and cross into the royal wing.

The royal wing always feels like stepping into a different world. The chandeliers drip crystal and candlelight in twinkling patterns like dappled light on leaves. The banisters are carved mahogany that have been polished until they gleam. I've walked this route hundreds of times and it still catches my breath.

Outside the dining room doors the ushers' staves are crossed, so we pause and wait. You never interrupt King Renard when he was speaking. Everyone knows that. I lean my ear toward the gap by the hinges.

Oh. It was a good one.

"Sounds like he's in the middle of the progress speech," I whisper excitedly.

Oakden rolls his eyes.

Honestly. Teenagers have no gratitude. King Renard has given us a roof, a floor, three meals a day, beds with real linens, and a chance to make something of ourselves. Oakden could afford to be impressed by a speech.

King Renard's voice rises, clear and warm, with the grandiose tone he gets when he's about to land the ending.

"Where my people once trudged through mud, I have laid cobblestone. Where my people once shivered in the cold, they now sit warm by hearths in their own homes."

I glance over and Oakden is mouthing the words. His face serious as stone in his silent impression. The little terror has memorized it.

I clamp my lips together to keep from laughing.

"My people once struggled to survive. We have climbed the mountain together, and now we rest at the summit of comfort. A roof for every head. A shoe for every foot. Grateful, every one of us, for each day in this most prosperous of cities."

Scattered applause follows his big finish.

The footmen pull open the doors, and we carry in our offering.

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## **Chapter Two**

### **The Carrots**

The delegation was small.

Four extra place settings at the king's table. They had not even needed to add the third leaf. I catalogue the visitors out of the corner of my eye as I cross the room. A tall woman in deep blue with a yellow pin at her shoulder. A thin man with a hawkish nose staring into his goblet. Two younger attendants behind them, dressed neatly but plainly. Some kind of trade envoy, I guess. They

only merit two servers and three courses, so can't be that important.

I set the lamb down in the front third of the table, right between the two candelabras at the head. The silver dome reflects the candlelight in a wobbling ring. I straighten the platter to ensure it's perfectly centered and take a step backwards into my place to wait for Oakden. I exhale softly and subtly wipe sweaty palms on my skirts. The platter is down. Not a drop spilled. Not a single goblet jostled. I've made it.

Oakden circles the foot of the table to the far side where he sets down the potatoes at side dish place one. Then heads back around the head towards the corresponding side dish place two. As he passes General Amarius, who is seated at the king's right hand, I shudder. Amarius has always given me the creeps. The back of his head is wispy hair brushed over a bald spot. I see his mouth in profile as he leans over and whispers something to King Renard. His thin lips are smiling, but his eyes are dark. He reminds me of a spider.

Oaken extends his arm to place the carrots and starts to wobble. My breath catches. I step out of my place before I realize I'm moving and steady his arm. His head whips toward me, his eyes huge, and his mouth shapes something that looks like *forgive me?*

He tilts his hand. The dish upends and carrots crash onto the table.

I watch in horrified silence as tiny orange logs tumble in slow motion across the white linen, leaving glossy tracks of maple syrup. A few roll neatly into General Amarius's lap.

He shoots to his feet. His face turns red, then redder. Even King Renard's face is stormy.

For three years I have only ever seen him with the warm, slightly tired kindness of a man who is constantly being asked for things. I've seen him laugh at a child who tugged his cloak in the courtyard. I've seen him bow his head when the queen spoke. I even saw him in the garden once, with his hand cupped under a butterfly.

I've never seen him look like this.

A storm cloud is not the right word. A storm cloud has weather inside it. The king's face had emptied.

"Seize them!" Amarius shrieks.

My ears ring.

"Take them to the dungeon at once for this. This. Impudence! Incompetence!" his voice echoes off the ceiling and deep into my soul.

No. No, no, no, no, no. This isn't happening.

Armor clanks behind me. Hands close around my upper arms.

Are my feet moving or am I being dragged? I think I'm breathing. Am I breathing? The chandelier blurs above me. All I see is Oakden's white face being shoved through the doors ahead of mine, and the carpeted hush of the royal hallway giving way to the colder, harder echo of stone.

Past the servants' stairs. Past the iron door with its single guard. Down. The stairs are narrow and steep, and the warmth of the dining room seeps away step by step. By the time we reach the bottom, my arms are cold inside the guard's grip.

A second guard with a ring of keys unlocks a barred door. The first guard shoves me forward and Oakden stumbles in behind me a moment later.

I open my mouth. I need to do something. Say something.

I want to ask for mercy. For forgiveness. Tell them it was my fault, I pushed him.

No words come. I'm a pathetic excuse for a sister.

The guards lock the door and walk back up the stairs. Their boot steps echo, and then they fade.

Silence rings.

I sink to the floor and stare at the stone between my knees. Somewhere a torch crackles. Somewhere water drips. My eyes trace the seam of the flagstone. Breathe in. Breathe out. The seam runs east to west. There was a little chip of mortar in the corner. Breathe in. Breathe out.

I had been months away from lady's maid. Months.

Now I'm going to be exiled. Or hanged. Or whatever they do to servants who embarrass the royal family in front of visiting envoys. I don't even know what they do. Even *my* mind has never gone there. It should have.

A nudge on my shoulder pulls me back.

"Sorry about that," Oakden whispers.

I lift my head to see he's crouched next to me with a soft smile.  
He's not even shaking.

"I needed a way into the dungeon."

I stare at him. Words must not be working in my ears.

"What?"

"I needed a way down here," he repeats, but I have not heard him any better. "Come on. Come keep watch by the door. The guard will be doing a lap. If you see him round the corner, tell me."

My mouth opens. My mouth closes. Now I'm a fish.

He's already at the door.

I crawl to the door because I don't trust my legs to stand. I peer through the bars into the empty corridor. My brother, my fourteen-year-old brother who insists on letting bugs out windows and catching mice to set them free outside, produces a thin metal rod from his pocket and slides it into the lock.

I hear a soft clunk and the door swings open.

"Oakden," I hiss. "Oakden, what is happening."

"Come on. We have to hurry."

He steps into the corridor.

He steps *into* the corridor.

I stand and stare down the empty hallway in front of me, and then run after him because what else am I going to do, let him be hanged alone?

"What is going *on*?" I whisper, as loudly as a whisper can be.

"Since when do you pick locks? Where did you get—"

"Quiet, Nell." he shushes me

We reach a door at the end of the corridor. He produced the rod again. He fiddles with the lock. Another click, and the door swings outward.

Light hits me like a slap.

I shield my eyes with one hand and Oakden grabs the other and drags me forward. My foot catches on a step and I stumble down a short flight of stone stairs, blinking through the spots in my vision. He pulls me into the corner where the stairs meet the wall and crouches down.

I blink and blink.

I'm looking at a courtyard. An open square, hemmed in on four sides by the castle walls. Sunlight glitters off the cobblestones. Piles of broken crates and scraps of wood are stacked against the far wall. The smell of smoke hangs thick in the air.

I scan the rest of the courtyard and my breath stops.

Thirty feet across the courtyard is a dragon.

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## Chapter Three

### The Stone Speaker

A dragon.

A real one.

I scramble backward until my spine hits the stone wall. Air won't come into my lungs. Breath in. Breath out. I'm trying, but I can't. I'm gasping in, and in again. All I can see is red. Red scales glittering in the sun. Smoldering embers.

"Nell. Nell, look at me. It's okay. The king has captured them."

I open my eyes.

Iron bars. Thick black iron, set in a heavy frame, twice as tall as a man. The dragon is behind them. The dragon is caged.

The breath I had been failing to exhale rushes out all at once. I almost laugh and let my head fall back against the warm stone.

Of course. *Of course* the king has captured a dragon. King Renard is a marvel. He's laid cobblestones in every town in the kingdom, and now he has caged a dragon too. There is nothing that man can not do.

I should not have doubted him, even for a heartbeat. I'd been so frightened that I had forgotten myself.

Oakden is speaking again. Quietly. Urgently. I will my ears to pay attention.

"I need to set them free."

I turn my head and blink at him. My hearing is still not working.

"What?"

"All three of them."

"Three?"

I quickly check around the corner of the wall again, in case another dragon appears out of nowhere.

There is not another dragon, thank heavens, but the courtyard is lined with cages.

The dragon's cage is the largest and sits against the wall closest to us. On the wall opposite, another cage holds something that looks like a giant lizard. The lizard is twice the size of any hound, with scales the color of sand and ridges of spikes along its back. Its head is long and crocodilian. It lays with its eyes closed, breathing slowly.

"Stone speaker, you must get the small one out."

I face back to Oakden.

"What did you call me?"

He stares back. "What?"

I'm still looking at his face when the voice comes again, but Oakden's mouth doesn't move. My eyes are not working either. The voice is deep and resonant. It rumbles through my chest and the back of my teeth.

"Stone speaker. You must get the small one out."

My head turns, very slowly, against my will.

I'm looking into the face of the dragon.

He's standing close to the bars. His head lowered to my height. His eyes are enormous and burn with the fury of barely banked coals. They're fixed on me.

"Who." I croak. It's not a question. I don't have a question. I'm lucky I have a word.

"You must get the small one out."

The voice is inside my head. The voice is inside my head, and it belongs to the dragon. The voice is inside my head, it belongs to a dragon, and it is talking to *me*. I'm going to throw up.

I hit my skull on the dungeon stairs. That was what happened. I hit my head and I'm in the infirmary right now. Mrs. Goverson will be lecturing me about climbing curtains, and any minute I'm going to wake up and laugh at all of this. Any minute.

"Is he talking to you?!" Oakden exclaims incredulously. I don't blame him, I'm clearly insane.

The dragon turns his head slowly to the side and huffs towards the ground.

I follow the line of his snout and see a small cage I didn't notice before. Although, to be fair, a monkey in a petticoat could have been dancing there and I still would have only seen the dragon.

It's barely a cage at all. It looks like someone threw it together from scrap wood. Inside is a small furry shape, curled tight against the back. I can make out matted white fur and a long red gash from its shoulder down its flank. Dried blood coats the stone beneath it.

"He, he wants us to rescue the cat," My voice does not sound like mine.

The door creaks open somewhere above us.

We freeze. Even my heart stops I'm pretty sure.

Two pairs of boots come down the stairs beside us and step out into the courtyard not three feet from where Oakden and I are sit frozen. Their ankles were so close to me I could have reached out and grabbed one.

"It's the only method that's gotten us anywhere."

"Maybe, but we've got limited attempts, and Amarius will have our heads if we kill it."

Their voices recede across the courtyard and into a door on the far side. The latch clicks behind them.

"We do not have much time."

The voice again. Closer now, or louder, or both.

"Get the small one out."

"*How do you propose that?*" I retort awfully boldly for someone who is about to die.

The dragon turns his head the other way and I follow the line of his nose again.

A metal grate sits on the ground in front of the far wall. Sparks jump through the slats. Black smoke and licks of flame curl up through the bars.

I swallow thickly and trace the iron seam of the grate with my eyes. I count the bars. Twelve across. Ten down. Breathe in. Breathe out.

I collect my thoughts and tear my eyes away. "That's the incineration pit. We'll be burnt to a crisp."

"I will protect you." The deep voice booms.

Before I can inquire what exactly that's supposed to mean, the dragon's body ripples. The shudder runs from the tip of his tail to the crown of his head, like a horse shaking off rain. At the center of his chest the scales shimmer with fire.

Not fire, I realize. Light.

One scale in the center of the chest begins to glow. It separates from the rest and lifts into the air.

It floats.

It floats between the bars, across the courtyard, and stops in front of me.

I am going to wake up now. Any minute. I close my eyes and open them again. The scale is still there. Floating. Asking me a question I do not understand.

Inexplicably, I reach out and grab it.

Heat sparkles through my arm and curls up behind my ribs. The scale glows brighter. *What a stupid thing to do. Grab a dragon's scale? You've no doubt fallen for an insidious ploy.* I try to drop it, but my hand won't open. My fingers clench tighter. The scale shrinks. It melts into my hand like wax over a flame.

I open my palm and it's gone.

Instead, on the inside of my wrist is a thin red mark. It shimmers faintly when the light catches in the way a piece of mica shimmers in stone. Like a fragment of scale has slipped under my skin.

I've been marked by a dragon.

Now I'm really going to throw up.

"Take hold of the small one and your companion."

I don't move. I'm not doing another thing this beast tells me to.

"Put your hand on the small one and hold onto your companion if you want him to live."

Oakden! That jolts me into action.

I grab Oakden's wrist and drag him with me to the small cage. The cat does not stir. Its breathing is so shallow I must squint to see its sides moving. I kneel and rest my hand gently on its shoulder.

"Do not let go, or they will perish."

"What? Why would they—"

I get my answer. The dragon rears back his head and a torrent of fire gushes out of his mouth towards us.

I scream and squeeze my brother's wrist so hard I feel the bones grind. I press my palm to the cat's shoulder as the fire engulfs us.

It doesn't burn.

I open my eyes and watch the wooden cage disintegrate. Oakden's mouth hangs open, his eyes wide and full wonder. He never developed common sense enough to be properly afraid of things. The flames dance across my dress but don't catch. The cat's fur is not even singed.

The fire blast subsides and I see the guards from before sprinting back into the courtyard, swords half drawn. They must have heard me scream. *Of course they did, because I screamed like an idiot and gave away our position.*

"You there! Stop in the name of the king!" My heart sinks.

The dragon tilts his head and another stream of fire sends the guards skidding behind a pile of crates.

"Go now! You must hurry."

So much for not listening to the beast anymore. I scoop the cat up against my chest with my right arm and grab Oakden's hand with my left and we run *to* the incineration pit.

Oakden lets go and reaches down to lift the grate, but shouts in pain and jerks his hands back. I quickly grab his shoulder again, remembering the dragon's warning to not let go. So help me, if my brother perishes because I can't follow instructions...

He stares down at his palms, and we watch the red welts fade. He looks up at me with what I'm sure on my own face as well. A mixture of wonder, fear, disbelief? I have no expression for this. I have no expression for any of this.

Keeping my hand securely on his shoulder this time, he reaches down again and throws the grate open.

The guards are shouting. The dragon's fire is fading. How long can they make fire for anyway? Are the guards safe? Do I want them to be safe? My mind grasps at any thought available other than the one in front of me. Anything other than the orange-red mouth to the pit of hell in front of us. The guard's shouting is getting closer. I look at my brother. For him. He must live.

I grip Oakden's hand and jump into my nightmares.

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We land knee-deep in coals, ash, and burning garbage. The pit is narrow but extends in a long tunnel. If I stretch out my arms I could touch both walls. Heat presses against my face, but fire does not touch us. I kick the embers with my boot and they scatter in an arc of sparks. A meteorite streaking across a tiny sky.

I put every thought out of my head except one foot in front of the other.

One foot. Other foot. Breathe in. Breathe out. Step. Step.

Not the smell. Not the smoke. Not the way the light flickered. I trace the seam of the stones with my eyes. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Not the house. Not the roof. Not the windows.

Step. Step.

Finally, we reach a square of light at the end of the tunnel.

It must be the air vent that feeds the fire. The hole is about as tall as I am, set knee-high into the wall, opening to nothing but the evening sky.

Oakden climbs up first. Still clinging to his hand and clutching the cat to my chest, I climb up beside him.

We stand teetering on the lip of a cliff over the moat.

I suck in a shaky breath. My entire life is burning up around me. Again.

That helps. I would, in fact, rather throw myself out of a window than think about *that* for another second.

I looked at Oakden and nod.

We jump.