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BOOK FIVE

THE
SHATTERED
CASTLE

JENNIFER A. NIELSEN



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the son of an old enemy, is conspiring against him and wants the throne for himself; his fiancée,
Imogen, seems to have turned against him; and the Prozarian Monarch has invaded his kingdom
and taken Jaron's castle—but Jaron has a lot of experience at hiding and escaping, and
he is not willing to leave Carthya or Imogen in the hands of his enemies.

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*To a few superfans:
Abigail and Ava
Anne, Isabella, Samantha, and Ben
Brooklyn
Katie
Nida
Roxy and Rubi
You earned your place here.*

Drylliad and Surrounding Areas

Farthenwood

TITHIO



EBERSTEIN

Elmhaven

Emmett's Farm

North City Gates

Roving River

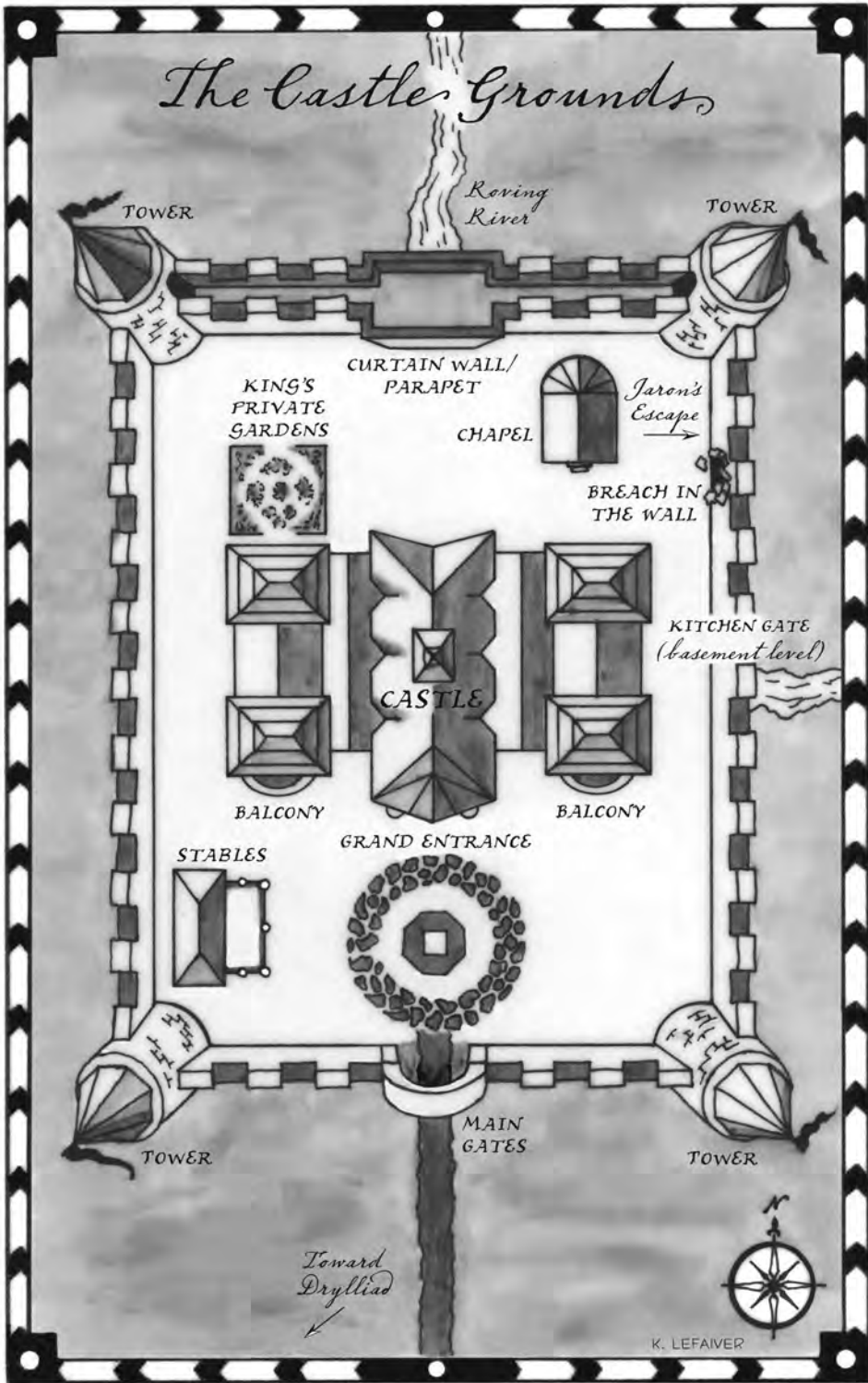
Waterfall

DRYLLIAD

The Castle



The Castle Grounds



· ONE ·

Throughout the years, I'd faced death more times than I could count, fought a war, endured the loss of my parents, and survived torture, cruelty, and multiple insults in the form of overcooked meat at the supper table. I thought that I had already faced the worst of anything this world might offer.

Then Lady Batilda Lamont came to the castle. Imogen's mother. She looked very much like Imogen — though Lady Batilda's hair was lighter and worn in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. However, Batilda hadn't even fully left the carriage before I ceased to see any true similarity between mother and daughter.

In the same instant she exited the carriage, it began.

"Imogen, your hair . . . surely someone here can work with that."

"Imogen, I'll need a new gown. Several new gowns."

"Imogen —" Finally, Batilda noticed me standing there, waiting to greet her. Her lips puckered in disapproval, or really, her entire face puckered, which I hadn't thought possible until this very moment. "*You are Jaron?*"

I had frozen as something close to panic sparked within me. I had known every kind of villain before, but this was new to me. I had sworn to Imogen that I would be polite and friendly, and I intended to keep my promise. However, no matter how hard I searched my mind, I couldn't come up with a single word that Imogen would approve of.

"King Jaron," Imogen corrected. "Mother, he's your king."

Lord Kerwyn, who had been standing at my side, stepped forward. "Madam, it is customary to bow before one's king."

"This boy is our king?" She shook her head, her expression souring with every movement. "And soon he will be my son-in-law. How wonderful."

Her tone implied that she believed having a thorn in one's foot was also wonderful. I was clearly the thorn.

I still hadn't said a word, but my gut had twisted so tight, I didn't know what I should say. Since the moment I'd learned that Imogen's mother would be coming to our wedding, I had expected this to be a difficult greeting. Batilda had sold Imogen to Bevin Conner as a way of paying for her personal debts. She had sold her own daughter.

"Try not to think about that when you meet my mother," Imogen had told me, but now that I was here, I could think of nothing else.

I eyed the balcony overlooking the main entrance, wondering how fast I could scale the castle wall and use it for an escape. That wouldn't be dignified behavior for a king, but I was still considering it.

Kerwyn cleared his throat. "Madam, you will bow to your king."

“Oh, very well.” Batilda gave me a bow, but it meant even less to her than it did to me. When she rose up again and looked behind me, her frown only deepened. “I understand that most castles are quite drafty. Will my room have any problems?”

“Definitely.” Sensing my opportunity, I eyed Kerwyn. “It was rude for us ever to offer our cold, drafty castle to this gentlewoman. Perhaps you will arrange for a room at the inn —”

“I can manage here, I suppose, if you’ll provide me with an extra servant to keep the fireplace stoked. How many servants will attend me?”

I clicked my tongue but didn’t sound nearly as disappointed as I’d intended. “What a pity, we ran out of servants this morning. But at the inn —”

“Someone will be assigned to your room.” Imogen took my arm, giving me a warning glance that I ignored. “Shall we go inside?”

“I thought you’d never offer. It’s blistering hot out here.” We came to the grand entry, a large gathering place for guests who wished to move onward into the great hall or the throne room. Those who lived in the castle could go up the master staircase directly in front of us.

Batilda pointed to a woven tapestry hung at the base of the master staircase. “Is that the one you burned? I heard —”

“Mother, stop,” Imogen said.

I forced a polite smile, though it caused me physical pain to do so. “No, not *that* tapestry.”

“Oh, of course. I would have noticed the burned areas. I also heard — What shall I call you?”

“Mother, you know very well —”

“I’ve also heard, Your Majesty, that your interests have shifted away from fire and are more in the realm of causing explosions. Is it true that six months ago you blew up four ships in a harbor across the sea?”

“Yes, madam, but I should add, they were not my ships.”

They had been the ships of a new enemy I had once thought was extinct: the Prozarians. I had defeated them in battle, and I hoped we had heard the last of them. But during every dark night, I lay awake in my bed, thinking of them, of what was coming. Most nights, I finally drifted off with more new questions than answers. How could I prepare for something I could not anticipate?

Batilda wasn’t finished with me. “And is it true that my daughter was on one of those ships that you exploded?”

“Yes, Mother, but it was my plan —” Imogen began.

She got no further before Batilda squared herself to me and looked straight into my eyes. “King Jaron, will my daughter be safe in a marriage with you?”

The question hit harder than Batilda might have known. Truthfully, Imogen would be safer with nearly anyone else in the kingdom, and every one of us in the room knew it. Even Kerwyn, standing behind Batilda, leaned in to hear my assurance that I could protect her.

But there was no truthful way to answer that question. If thoughts of the Prozarians did not keep me awake at night, this question did.

“Jaron has saved my life on more than one occasion,” Imogen said.

“Your life would not have needed saving except for Jaron.”

Batilda turned back to me. “Is it also true that you were once a thief who went by the name of Sage?”

I hesitated, looking from her to Imogen. This conversation could not possibly be going worse.

“Jaron . . . Oh!” Tobias entered from the great hall and stopped when he saw Imogen’s mother. Collecting himself, he said, “Forgive the intrusion, but Harlowe has asked to see you.”

Rulon Harlowe was my chief regent, and Roden’s father. Harlowe had never aspired to become a chief regent, or really, to be a regent at all, which was the exact reason I wanted him in that position. He and Tobias were also more loyal than nearly all my other regents put together. That wasn’t necessarily a reflection of their good characters as much as it was a statement of the spineless, power-hungry nature of most of the other regents.

“Is it urgent?” I asked, nodding slightly as a hint for Tobias to answer.

“The wedding is in three days,” Batilda said. “Have either of you given a single thought to which silver pattern you want for the supper?” She turned to stare at Tobias. “What can you possibly want with Jaron that is more important than a silver pattern?”

“I, uh . . .” Tobias looked over at me with the same expression a person might use when the ground beneath them has just collapsed. “No, I suppose it can wait.”

“Clearly we have a crisis,” I announced, but I didn’t get far before a voice behind me stopped me in my tracks.

“King Jaron!” When I turned, the person was already bowing, so at first I wasn’t sure who had come to further ruin my afternoon. Tobias gestured at me, signaling that this person,

standing with his body bent low in the doorway of the throne room, was the crisis.

To whoever was still bowing, I said, “Can you not rise again, sir? If you need help, Tobias is a physician, sort of.”

Then he rose, and I recognized him immediately. This was someone I had not seen in many years, nor did I have the least desire to see him. If he was anything like his father, then I already understood why Tobias looked so concerned.

“Castor Veldergrath.”

Son of Santhias Veldergrath, a mold that had infested Carthya for far too long.

His son would be no different.

• TWO •

If I'd had any manners, I would have said something more to Castor, such as "Welcome to my castle," or "It's good to see you again."

Only, he wasn't at all welcome here, and none of this was good. It wasn't even tolerable. I knew little of Castor now, though as a boy he had been spoiled and disagreeable. Perhaps the same was true of me, but at least I had charm. Castor was the son of Santhias Veldergrath, a former regent and a man who had planned to kill me, Roden, and Tobias when he heard rumors of Conner seeking a false prince. Turns out he wanted to become king himself, and the three of us were in his way. My first act upon being restored to the throne was to strip Veldergrath of his title and his position as a regent.

If Castor was here now, then more trouble was coming.

So rather than any gesture of politeness, or for that matter, any basic civility, I simply asked Castor, "What do you want?"

He smiled at me, then turned to bow to Imogen. "My lady, it's good to see you again."

"Again?" I asked.

"Most times when I go to market, he's there too," she

said, as if their regular meetings at the market were only a coincidence.

“Since when does a Veldergrath go to the market for himself?” I asked.

“When does a future queen?” he countered, settling his eye on Imogen. “And is this lovely woman your mother?”

Batilda giggled. An actual giggle. I felt nauseous.

He took Batilda’s hand and kissed it. “In a different world, you might have been queen.”

Kerwyn stayed with them, hopefully to keep control of Castor’s flirting, while I crossed the room to speak to Tobias in private. “Why is he here?”

“Harlowe told him to stay in the regents’ room.”

“No, why is he here in my castle?”

“Let’s go to the regents’ room, and I can explain on the way.”

I turned back to Imogen and caught her eye. She smiled at me, but her brow was pressed low, concerned over what was happening. I gestured with my head that I was leaving with Tobias, and she nodded back at me.

Tobias walked beside me toward the regents’ room. “Imogen’s mother seems . . . nice.”

“I think she breathes fire in her sleep.” I ran a hand through my hair. “Tell me about Castor.”

“It’s not him. There’s a bigger problem.”

“Oh?” I stopped to stare at him. “So when I asked if it was urgent, and you said no —”

“I got nervous, Jaron. The way Imogen’s mother glared at me —”

That made sense. Other than pausing to glare at Tobias,

she'd fixed her eye on me with the same disdain that Mrs. Turbeldy used to have when I'd lived in her Orphanage for Disadvantaged Boys. I knew why Mrs. Turbeldy hated me. I'd offended her nearly every day that I had stayed there. Batilda clearly hated me more.

"So what's the problem?"

Tobias drew in a deep breath. "The regents have resigned."

"Which regents?"

By then, we had arrived at the regents' room. Harlowe was inside and stood to greet me. After a brief bow, he answered my question. "All of them have resigned, other than Tobias and me."

My hands formed into fists. "Why?"

"They've been sending messengers all afternoon, every one with a different excuse. Tobias and I couldn't make sense of it, until —"

"Castor's arrival." Surely there was some connection between him and this new problem.

"Ahem."

I turned and groaned. Castor had arrived again, with yet another low bow that I only saw out of the corner of my eye.

"Forgive me," Castor said. "I was so taken with your future bride and her mother that I didn't realize you had left."

I turned to face him. "If Harlowe tells you to remain here in the regents' room, that is what you do. You will not wander this castle as if it's yours."

His right eye flinched slightly; then he regained his boldness. "Apologies, my king —"

"Am I your king, Castor?"

"Of course. You saw the way I bowed."

“I figured your back had gone out. But if I am your king, then tell me now: Are you the reason why eighteen regents just resigned their offices?”

Castor’s smile spread across his face like spilled oil. “With a little more time, it will be all your regents.”

“Perhaps we should sit down.” Harlowe held out one hand, inviting me farther inside. I kept my eye on Castor as I walked to my chair at the head of the table. Harlowe took his place beside me, with sheets of parchment on the table in front of him — the resignations of the other regents, I assumed. Tobias sat in his usual chair near the end of the table, since he had less seniority than most of the other regents. Castor pulled out a chair to sit down, but I shook my head. “That chair is for a regent. I’ll get you another one.” The servant attending the door was Errol, who had once worked for Conner in his former estate of Farthenwood. He would know what I wanted. I said to Errol, “The blue chair, please.”

Errol barely suppressed a smile as he dipped his head at me, then disappeared, returning a minute later with the chair. Early in our training to impersonate a prince, Conner had put us through lessons in an upper schoolroom. One of the chairs in that room was meant for a five-year-old. I had a fond memory of it.

The chair was placed against the wall for Castor. His lip curled when he stared down at it. “I won’t sit there.”

“Then you’re welcome to stand. I assumed with your back problems —”

“I have no back problems. I was simply offering you a respectful bow, one that I already regret.”

“Why did you bother bowing at all? You are clearly behind the resignation of my regents, so what do you want?”

“I want only what is owed to me.” Which I figured involved a day or two in my dungeon, but he quickly added, “I am here to restore my father’s position as regent.”

“Your father has not been a regent for two years. Did he send you here?”

“My father is dead.” Castor’s words lingered in the air. Again, basic courtesy would require me to express sympathy, but I hadn’t been polite yet and I didn’t see any reason to start now.

Instead, I said, “Your father was not a regent when he died and cannot have his title back now that he is dead. What a strange request.” I turned to Tobias. “Can you imagine that, seating a corpse here as regent? I grant you, I might like him better that way.”

“My father’s title must be restored so that I can inherit it.” Castor arched his head. “My request is within the boundaries of law.”

“Which law?”

Harlowe cleared his throat. “It’s an archaic law, Your Highness, still in our books, but to my knowledge, has never been used in Carthya in quite this way. In the early days of Carthya, during the time of the three rulers, there was sometimes the problem of one ruler dismissing the regent that another preferred. The law was put in place to allow the eldest child of the regent to reclaim the position so that a family could have the chance to redeem themselves.”

“That’s a stupid law. Watch carefully.” I leaned forward

and snapped my fingers. “There, now it’s not a law anymore. I just decreed it.”

“I thought you’d say that, so I have another plan.” Castor looked at Harlowe. “Tell him.”

Harlowe pushed the sheets of parchment toward me, and they were exactly as I had thought, the regents’ resignations. “Each one names Castor Veldergrath as his or her successor. Jaron, Castor has the right to be named as a regent.”

“And I have the right to review these papers before making any decisions.” I stood and pushed back my chair. “As you may have heard, in a few days, I’m getting married, and then Imogen and I will take a little time to ourselves. When that time has passed, I’ll begin that review.”

“How much time?” Castor asked.

“Eighty years, at least,” I said. “But do not worry. This will be my top priority once I’m back to work. Until then, you must leave the regents’ room, for you have no place here.” Looking at Errol again, I added, “Please see him out of the castle.”

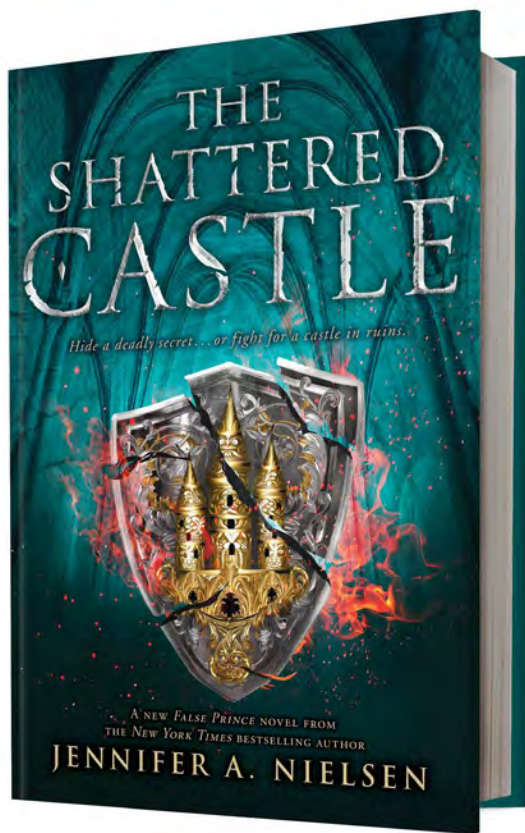
Castor stood, his face reddening. “This is a mistake, Jaron. When I return —”

“Be careful that the rest of your sentence does not become treason,” Harlowe warned.

Castor closed his eyes and drew in a breath, exhaling with, “When I return for your wedding, my king, I hope you will have changed your mind.”

He bowed again and left the room. The instant he did, I turned to Tobias. “Make sure that Castor Veldergrath gets nowhere near my wedding.”

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