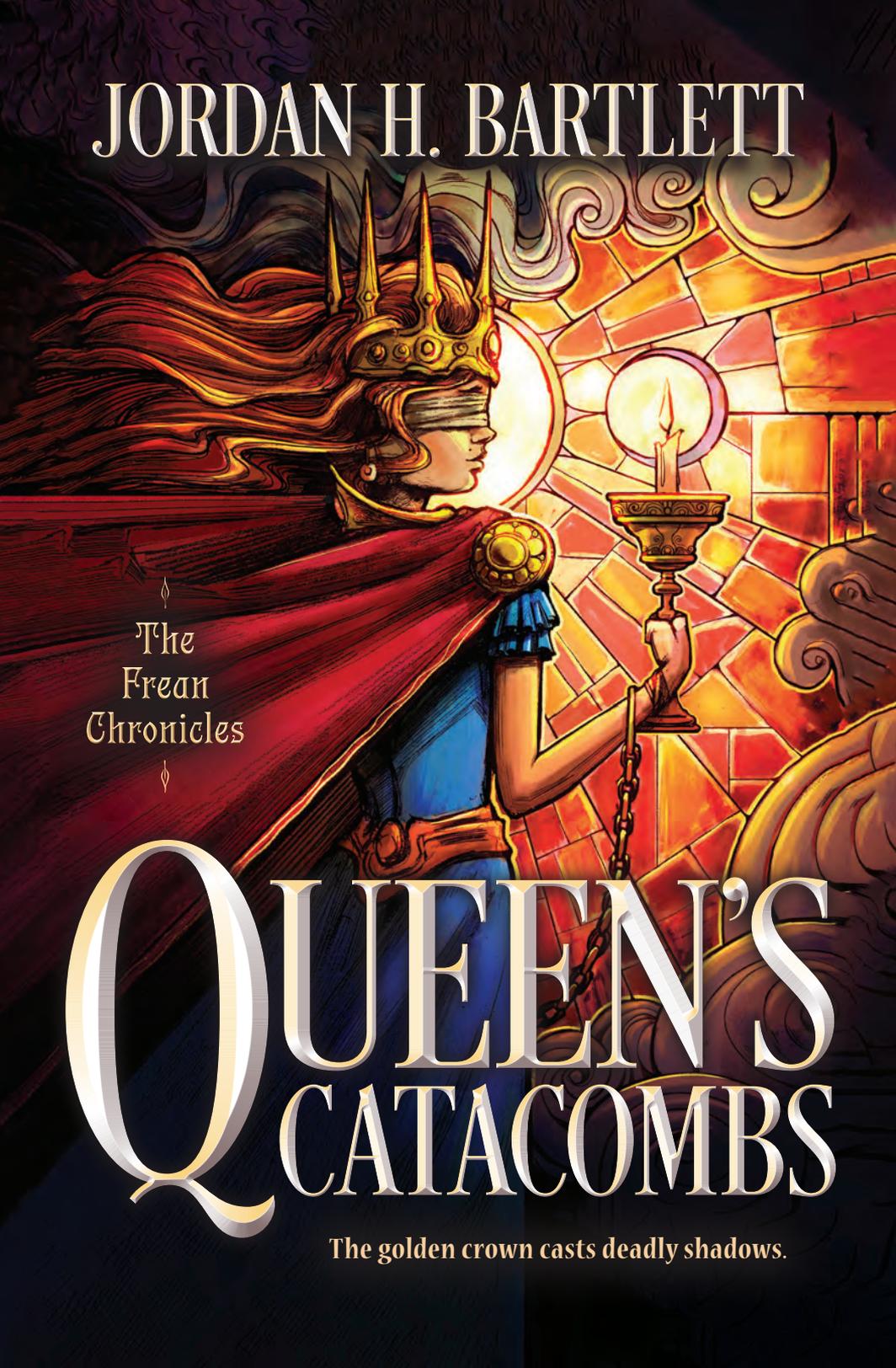


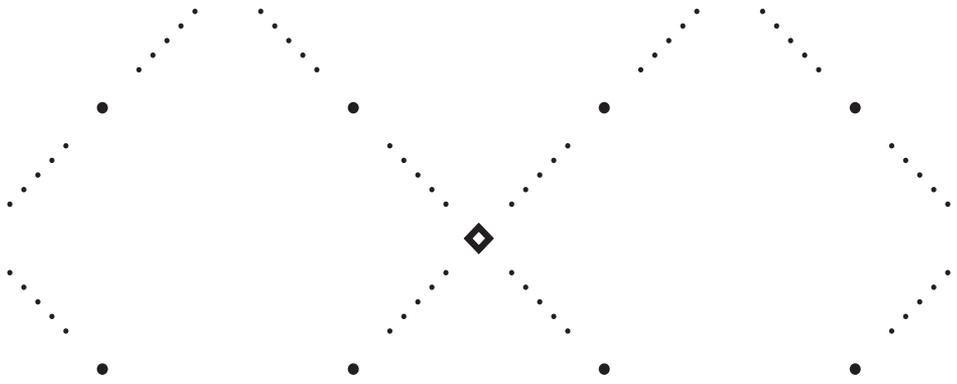
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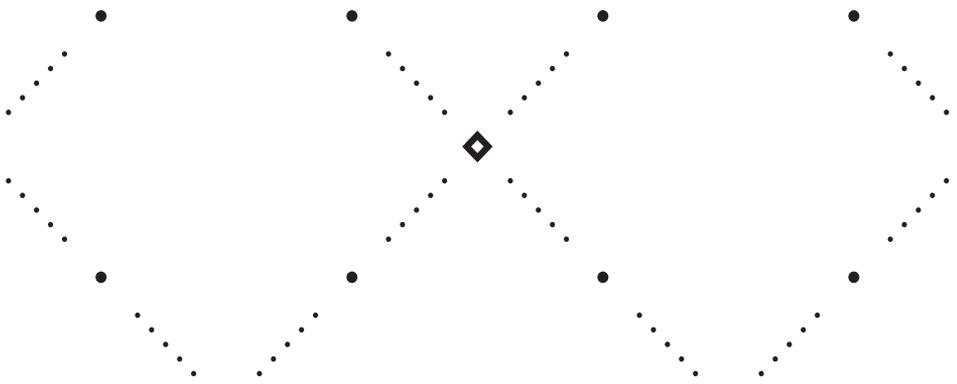


QUEEN'S  
CATACOMBS

The golden crown casts deadly shadows.



# QUEEN'S CATACOMBS



JORDAN H. BARTLETT

❖  
The  
Fean  
Chronicles  
❖

# QUEEN'S CATACOMBS

The golden crown casts deadly shadows.



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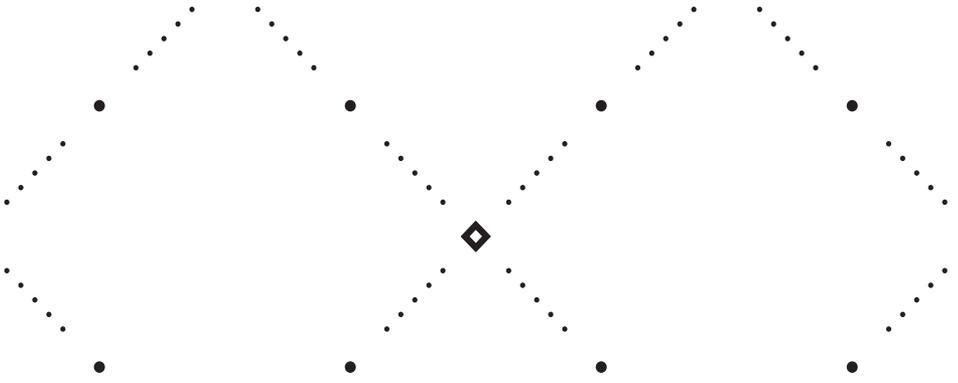
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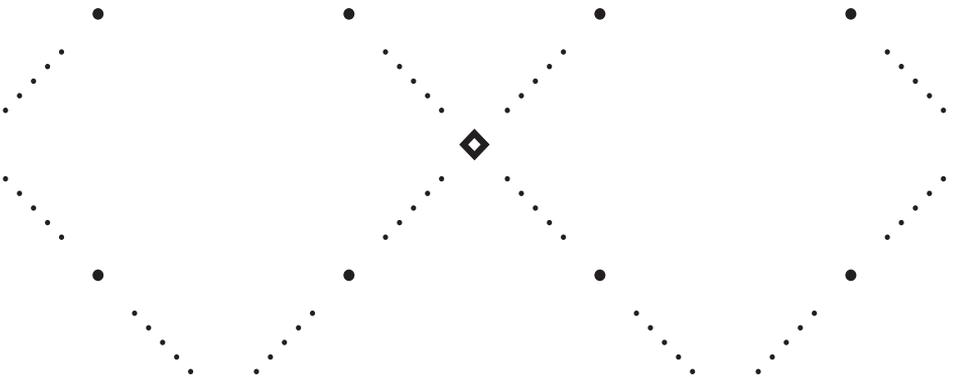


*In memory of Nana Jill,*

*for showing me the true power of a matriarch.*

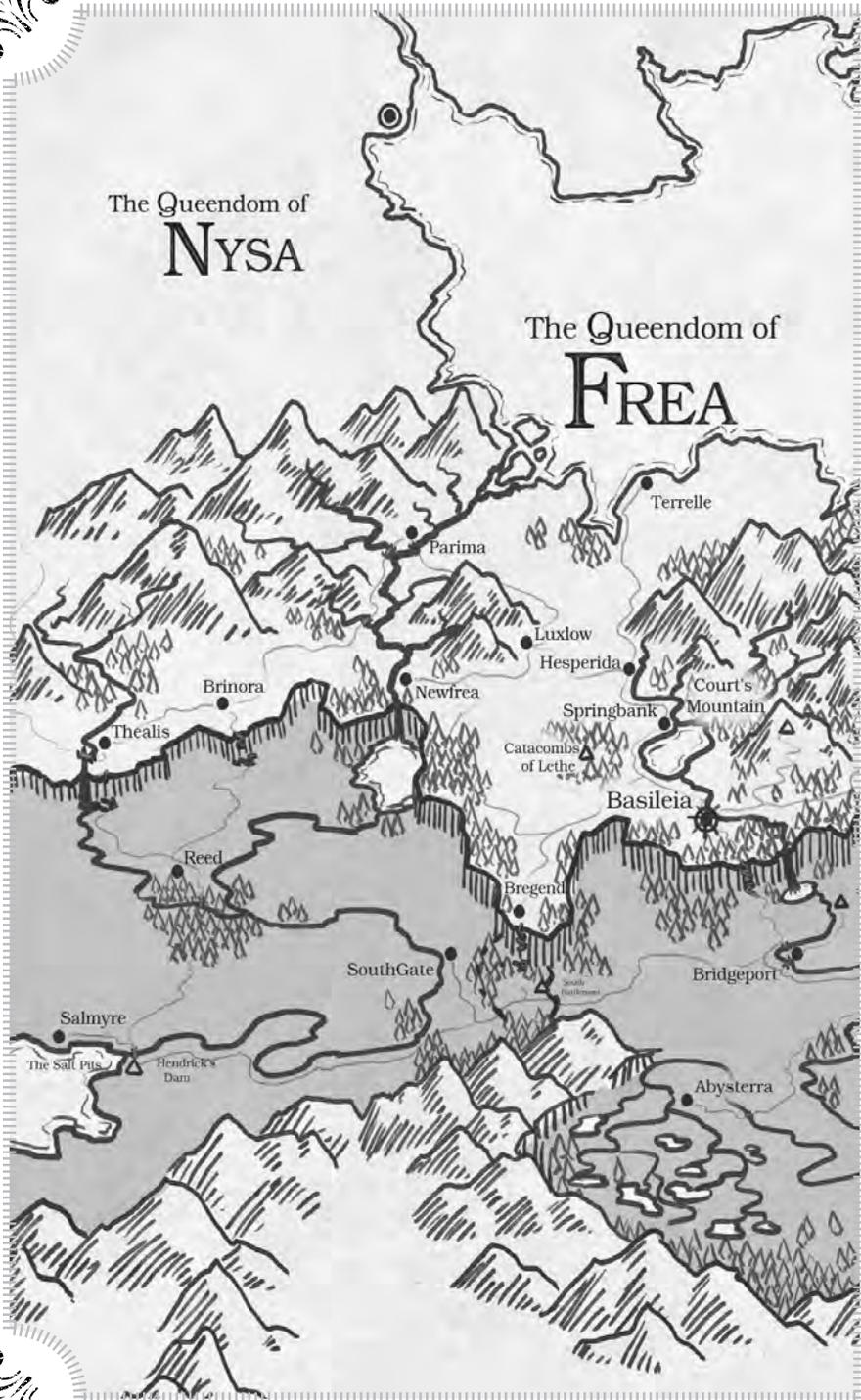
*You had all the time in the world for me,*

*I wish I had a little more time with you.*



The Queendom of  
**NYSA**

The Queendom of  
**FREA**







# 1

## PLANNING THE GAMBIT

“Tell me where you’re keeping them.”

Jacs balled her fists, manicured fingernails digging into her palms. She swept her cloak behind her. It was a rich deep blue velvet edged with silver ermine and a gold embroidered trim. A true vestment of state, one she could not have dreamed of setting eyes on three months ago, let alone wearing.

The good it did her now.

She stood in the center of the Council of Four’s chamber. The chamber’s floor sank in the middle like a caldera and four sets of three steps rose away from it, marking the points of a compass. At the top of each set of steps sat a member of the Council. Their chairs were as close to throne-like as was allowed. The entitled self-indulgence of the Councilors dripped from every aspect of this chamber’s decor. Jacs

glared up at each smug countenance and tried not to act like the petulant child they thought her to be.

She could not believe her predecessor, Queen Ariel, had been oblivious to the terrifying power the Four wielded. Maybe she had known but, like Jacs, lacked the ability to do anything but stomp her feet and dance to their tune.

“My dear, repetition of this request will not change the answer,” Cllr. Gretchen Dilmont drawled. She sat at the north point of the room’s compass. Her short, white-blonde hair stood on end and her red-lipped mouth curled up in one corner as she spoke. She did not deign to look at her Queen and instead examined the large gold ring on her index finger.

“Indeed, it’s repetition of an action with an expectation of a different outcome that is the very definition of insanity. Are you quite well, child?” Cllr. Rosalind Perda added. She sat directly opposite Cllr. Dilmont. Jacs had to spin around to face her. Cllr. Perda’s dark, pinched features sharpened into a smile. Jacs imagined herself to be a mouse under the gaze of a hawk, the Councilor’s sharp eyes taking in every out-of-place auburn hair on Jacs’s head. Her own black hair was slicked back and secured with a jeweled hair comb. Blood-red rubies surrounded a tear-shaped onyx stone. It almost looked like a crown. Almost.

“Yes, should we call Master Epione? She may have a tincture for you.” Cllr. Beatrice Fengar piped up from Cllr. Perda’s left. She appeared to be enjoying the banter and, in Jacs’s experience, never tended to add anything of substance to an interaction. Her thick brown hair was piled high on top of her head in a swirling bun, loose waves framing her high cheekbones. She fiddled with the silver fringe of her sleeve and smiled at Jacs.

Through her smile lacked the coldness that emanated from the first two Councilors, Jacs still clenched her teeth. She felt like a ball of yarn being batted about by three smug cats.

“Now Councilors, have a heart. It can be frightening when a girl loses her mother.” Cllr. Portia Stewart’s wispy voice came from the equally wispy woman directly opposite Cllr. Fengar. Again, Jacs was forced to spin around. Cllr. Stewart’s brow was creased with concern. She looked about the room at each of her colleagues and pursed her lips slightly. She was perched on the edge of her seat with the look of a bird ready to take flight. Her pure white hair floated around her like a cloud.

Jacs glared at her and retorted hotly, “I haven’t *lost* her; I know you have her. Likely the same place you have Master Leschi. Now, where are they?” Her stomach tightened. She had last seen her mother, battered and beaten on the floor of a prison cell, moments before the Prince proclaimed Jacs as the Queen. As for Master Leschi, Jacs hadn’t seen her since they’d launched their final hot-air balloon; her mentor’s face had been bright with hope, excitement, and pride as Jacs drifted farther and farther into the sky. Recalling her mother’s bruised and bloodied face, she dreaded the thought of what Master Leschi might look like now.

What she would give to see her again. Her mentor had always known what the next steps should be, and how to get Jacs there. After the purple-hooded assassins shot Queen Ariel from their clocktower, it had been Master Leschi who suggested Jacs compete to win the crown for their people. But what kind of queen was Jacs shaping up to be if she couldn’t even free the two most important women in her life? She could stare their captors in the face with a crown on her head and an ermine cloak around her shoulders yet enact absolutely no change.

It was clear from the moment they discovered her Lowrian heritage that the Councilors disapproved of her winning the crown, but over the last three months it became obvious that they were actively working against her. Their withholding of Master Leschi and Maria Tabart was one of the many ways they ensured Jacs knew who was really in control of the Queendom.

She turned back to Cllr. Fengar, who piped up redundantly. “Maybe a glass of warm milk to settle the nerves?”

Jacs said nothing. She was used to being ignored by Cllr. Perda and Cllr. Dilmont, but being ignored by Cllr. Fengar felt like hitting a new low.

“And let’s acknowledge the hard work our little queen is putting into fulfilling our requests. Surely that’s worth a treat?” Cllr. Perda said.

Jacs set her jaw and waited. Rotating her healed wrist, she felt a ripple of satisfying pops. It had never quite been the same since she had broken it climbing Court’s Mountain in the first task. While Master Epione had mended it as well as she could, that little melody of pops remained, as a permanent souvenir from the Contest.

“You’re right, but what to give a girl who has everything?” Cllr. Dilmont said sardonically, still not looking up from her ring.

Jacs took a breath and forced her voice to remain level. “You *know* what I want,” she said. “Let my mother go. Tell me where Master Leschi is. Or at least let me see them. It’s been three months. I’ve done all you’ve asked. Let them go.” Jacs bit her tongue to hold back the *please* that almost burst from her lips. She would not beg. A queen did not beg.

The Councilors looked at one another.

“Oh, poppet, no. That we cannot do,” Cllr. Stewart said. She actually looked contrite.

Jacs wasn’t surprised, but somehow the answer still hurt. She looked up into each of the four Councilors’ eyes in turn, trying to find some warmth, some shred of compassion.

“However,” Cllr. Perda said after a time, “we do have some correspondence from your mother that was delivered to us.”

Jacs’s heart skipped a beat, but she forced her face to remain impassive.

Cllr. Perda continued. “Unfortunately, we cannot share it unless a certain document is signed by the hand of the Queen.”

Jacs almost rolled her eyes, but again restrained herself. It would be easier if they just stated what they required of her at the beginning of each meeting. Instead, Jacs had to follow the steps of their specific dance, only learning each new step right before her foot touched the ground.

“What document is this?” she asked.

Cllr. Perda inclined her head toward Cllr. Fengar, who pulled a piece of parchment from a small side table by her elbow. Holding it delicately, she read its contents.

Jacs listened carefully, knowing that she did not have much of a choice in whether she signed it or not. Through the lengthy jargon, Jacs determined it was a document that called to shift the border between Lord Witbron’s and Lord Claustrom’s lands. Apparently, Lord Witbron of Luxlow was bequeathing 10 percent of her lands to Lord Claustrom of Hesperida voluntarily. However, as it was land initially gifted by the crown, Jacs needed to sign off on its transfer.

Jacs walked up the few steps to retrieve the parchment from Cllr. Fengar. Moving over to a small desk in the northeast corner of her sunken dais, she bent over the paper, dipped her quill in the provided inkwell, and was poised to sign. Melted wax pooled in a small dish above a candle to the right of her hand, ready to be poured for her seal.

“. . . Lord Hera Claustrom is eager to put this new land to better use and bids to thank the Queen for her blessing in this matter,” Cllr. Fengar finished.

Jacs jerked upright with a start, her quill dripping a dollop of ink on the line for her signature. “Who?” Jacs asked.

“Lord Hera Claustrom,” Cllr. Fengar repeated.

“No,” Jacs said, “you mean *Dame* Hera Claustrom?” Although still new to the hierarchy and politics of the Upper Realm, Jacs knew Dame Hera Claustrom. Hera, a contestant beaten by Jacs in the Contest of Queens. The current Dame who actively spoke against Jacs at

every opportunity in the embarrassment that was the public throne-room audience. Her mother was Lord Sybil Claustrom. Very wealthy, very influential, and very much in control of most of the Lords in the Upper Realm.

“No, Councilor Fengar did not misspeak.” Jacs turned to face Cllr. Perda. “You must have been visiting Newfrea when the announcement was made. Dame Hera Claustrom has inherited her mother’s title of lord, as the now Lady Sybil Claustrom wishes to spend her remaining years in a little more peace. Given her many contributions to our queendom throughout her reign, she has certainly earned some time to reap the fruits of her labor.” Cllr. Perda’s sharp eyes narrowed slightly, but her remaining features depicted humble reverence.

Jacs’s thoughts reeled, and her heart sank. *More good news*, she thought glumly.

Almost apologetically, Cllr. Stewart cut across her musing. “You have yet to sign, dear,” she said.

Jacs looked down, her hand hovering over the parchment. The blot sat defiantly at the beginning of her line. Looking up, she said, “Let me see the letter you have from my mother first.”

Cllr. Perda clicked her tongue. “So distrusting.”

Jacs waited.

“Here,” Cllr. Perda said finally, pulling a grubby scrap of parchment from a pocket within her bell sleeve.

Jacs’s heart jumped to her throat. She swallowed, bent, and signed the document. Without looking at any of them, she poured the thimble-sized ball of wax onto the bottom, removed her signet ring that held the royal sigil, and pressed it down. Rich molten wax pillowed around the edges of the ring. Methodically, she dusted and blew on the ink, peeled her ring out of the wax, leaving the ornate Frean *F* behind, rolled up the document, and walked up to stand in front of Cllr. Perda.

Cllr. Perda slowly extended her hand to receive the parchment. Jacs held hers out expectantly in return. There was a moment of

tension. Neither woman yielded. Each waited to feel the weight of the other's paper in her palm before relinquishing her own. Jacs made the first move, extending her wrist a fraction, and the document landed home. Once Cllr. Perda's fingers snapped shut, Jacs snatched her mother's letter and clutched it to her heart. Cllr. Perda's eyes sparkled in victory, and the corners of her mouth twitched up slightly in a smirk. Jacs didn't care. She walked back down to her dais, the note still at her breast, and inclined her head slightly to each Councilor in turn.

"If that is all, I must attend to this in my study." She fought to remain composed, the facade of a queen a mere glimmer on her countenance. The Councilors said nothing to detain her, and she turned toward the door at the southwest corner of the room. She passed between Cllr. Perda and Cllr. Fengar, determined to avoid eye contact with both of them.

The heavy door closed behind Jacs, and she took a breath to steady herself. Flanking the doorway stood Chivilras Amber Everstar and Andromeda Turner, her friends and knights of the Queensguard. Both wore the lightweight leather armor and sheathed short sword that befitted a knight of the realm.

It was said that knights did not need a weapon at all: their training and teamwork took them to the height of physical lethality, and their sheathed swords were mere symbols of that. Jacs had watched them train. It was an awe-inspiring sight watching two women moving and striking as one unit.

Amber's crooked grin turned into a frown at the look of distress on Jacs's face. She stood at ease, chin naturally jutting forward—likely from a life lived as the shortest woman in most rooms—brown eyes alert and bright. A long coil of dark brown hair hung in a sleek tail down her back. Andromeda, in contrast, stood over a head taller than her partner. She was a woman of sharp angles and cold calculations, yet her dark eyes were always soft and her tone never barbed with anything harsher than sarcasm. Her ash blonde hair was restrained

in a fishtail plait swept over one shoulder. They made an odd set of bookends, and despite the disparity, Amber's presence always seemed more imposing than her partner's. The personification of a rock and a hard place.

Amber nodded pointedly to Andromeda, who stepped out in front, leading the way. Placing a hand on the small of Jacs's back, Amber whispered in her ear, "We're almost clear, Jacqueline."

With the warmth of Amber's hand, Jacs stood up straighter and walked silently through the corridors. Thankfully, they did not meet anyone of note along the way. Jacs did not quite know where they were taking her, but she knew enough to trust Amber's direction. She clung to the small piece of paper and placed one foot in front of the other until she found herself outside in the palace gardens.

Corridors, tapestries, and torches were replaced with cobbles, hedges, and the sweet scent of spring flowers. They crossed a checkered lawn often used for large games of chess and came across Connor, sitting at a desk that had most likely been moved outside at his request. Papers littered the surface, and two guardpairs stood to attention around the perimeter of the makeshift outdoor study.

Connor, Royal Advisor to the Queen, formally Cornelius Freat, looked up as Jacs approached and smiled. He stood to greet her. His brown hair was tousled from the breeze, and he wore the Royal Advisor's seal pinned over his heart. A golden ring encircling a crossed sword and feather.

Jacs ran to him. She caught a glimpse of his smile furrowing in concern before her arms were around his neck and her head was burrowed in his chest. She was aware of Amber's muttered comment to Andromeda, aware of the guardpairs' instructed aversion of gaze, aware even that the gardeners they passed earlier would now be privy to this impulsive action of their Queen. But for now, it was enough to feel Connor's hand on her hair, to hear his murmured "hey," and to count his heartbeats against her cheek.

It was enough.

“Come, sit with me,” he said after her breathing had slowed. She nodded and allowed him to lead her to one of the stone benches at the edge of the small courtyard he had adopted for his study. The guard-pairs shifted to accommodate this change in position without being told, and without looking directly at the Queen and her Advisor. Jacs and Connor settled on the herb-flanked bench. Jacs noted the scents of rosemary and lavender and smiled sadly. The smell sparked a memory of Master Leschi’s cluttered workshop.

“Rosemary for memory,” she said.

Connor, whose arm was around her shoulders, gave her a squeeze. “A scholar’s best friend, they say,” he replied.

He searched her face for a moment before kissing her chastely on the cheek.

“We’ll find them,” he said.

Jacs saw hope glitter in his blue eyes and felt the cold hands around her heart loosen. She sighed. “I mean, we at least know who knows where they are. Getting them to talk is the next step.” She wrinkled her nose in frustration.

She didn’t know what was worse, having no leads at all, or their only lead being a dead end.

“Well,” he said tentatively, “we don’t know that for sure.”

Jacs decided not to have this discussion again and instead pulled out her mother’s letter. “They gave me this today,” she said quietly.

Connor made a motion to take it, changed his mind, and cocked his head.

She ran her finger over the broad-stroked *J* on the front. Looking at the letter in the light she noticed it was grubbier than she had initially thought. The paper was folded in half and its edges were frayed. The *J* was written with a shaking hand. Black ink splatters and blotches of a dark rust color peppered the page. Jacs held it closer, gasped, and recoiled. Eyes wide, she looked at Connor. He must have

realized at the same time, because he asked very quietly, “Is that . . .? It’s not . . . That looks like . . .”

Dried blood.

Hardly daring to breathe, she unfolded the paper and saw the same shaking and splotchy writing inside. Over top of her mother’s writing, sections had been painted over with black ink. A neat script had been added to the bottom of the letter in a different hand:

*Certain sections have been omitted due to their lack of relevance to the Queen’s needs.*

Eyes darting back to her mother’s writing, she forced the bile rising in her throat down and read:

*Plum,  
Am well. Can’t say where, —————. It’s dark all the time and I  
can hear —————. I miss you. Please —————.  
I love you.*

Connor read the short message over her shoulder, snapped his fingers, and ordered: “A goblet of wine for Her Majesty. She is not feeling well.” At once, a pair of guards bowed and started toward the castle. Amber and Andromeda smoothly took their positions, hands clasped in front.

Jacs’s composure, which had been slipping all afternoon, finally cracked. She felt heat flare in her cheeks and her brow darkened. She wanted to scream, to throw something, but knew the Council had eyes everywhere. Any perceived loss of control would paint her as weak and unfit to rule. She thought of her mother, holed up who knew where, hopeful that her note would reach sympathetic eyes. Each letter laboriously traced on parchment, only to be blacked out by an unfeeling brute.

“Connor,” Jacs breathed. She felt as though a griffin were sitting on her chest. “I need you to distract me. Right now. I don’t want to think about this here. *Please.*” she held his gaze to keep from drowning.

“Okay, sure. Okay.”

Connor looked about him hurriedly, arm still tight around her. With the other hand, he took the note, put it carefully in his breast pocket, and took her hand in his.

“Well, how about I tell you what I’ve been working on. Okay? Okay. I’ve been looking at our gold stores.” As Connor spoke, he rubbed the back of Jacs’s hand with his thumb, his tone low and soothing. “It’s a bit of a head scratcher, actually. Every year we get a documented amount of eggshells from the Court, and every year the treasury’s books document a significantly larger deposit. I’m not sure if I would consider that a problem. In fact, it really is the opposite of a problem. I definitely wouldn’t complain, it’s just I can’t find any reason why we would be so much better off with each hatching than we should be.”

Jacs took quick, shallow breaths and listened intently. She nodded for him to continue.

“And if it’s the case that all the golden eggs from the Court are accounted for appropriately, then where would we be getting all the extra eggshells? It would be different if it were an extra shell every so often, but it’s almost half the Court’s amount every hatching.” Connor paused for a moment and gave her hand a squeeze. “It really just doesn’t make sense,” he finished.

Jacs’s breathing slowed. She stared at the ring on her pinkie finger, Connor’s fingers wrapped around hers. The ring was smaller than her royal seal. It was her first gift from Connor, even though they had not yet met when she received it. She remembered the little boat that had sailed down the waterfall and washed up at the base of the cliff separating their two realms.

Their two worlds.

To think, a little ring could lead to all this. She had worn it these last five years, although when she was younger it had hung from a cord, then a chain around her neck; now it sat proudly on her finger.

Shining in the sunlight, the tiny, engraved Griffin pranced above golden clouds. The Court of Griffins were the Queendom's only source of gold. Their golden eggshells had supplied the two realms ever since people had formed an alliance with them. Connor was right: for the Queendom to consistently have more than what the Court provided didn't make sense.

"Who is in charge of tallying the gold shells?" Jacs asked.

"The Council of Four. I believe Cllr. Fengar is normally in charge of the gold income. From there, some is transferred to the gold merchants, a portion of it goes to the Lower Realm during Trading Week and the rest is divvied up to pay debts, to fund the military, to subsidize various guilds and so on," Connor replied. He ticked off the items on his fingers.

Jacs, whose experience with the Councilor still rang in her ears, asked sharply, "Why does Cllr. Fengar have that role?"

Connor raised an eyebrow. "Because it's one of the highest honors to bestow on a person and the Four are second only to the Queen. The Queen doesn't do it herself because she has too many other important duties to oversee, and the task may put her life at risk."

He pulled back a little and searched her face again. He frowned.

"Jacs," he said in a low voice, "I know your dealings with the Four have been rocky, and I know you think they're behind what's happening to your mother—"

"I *know* they're behind what's—"

"But—" he pressed firmly, pausing for a moment as he searched for his next words. "You have to understand, they are core pillars to our way of life. Not just for the Upperrites but the Lowrians too. This is so much bigger than a personal dispute. They are the cogs that keep the Queendom's machine running. Maybe if you saw them as less of

an enemy . . . maybe if you tried . . . you could start working on the same side?"

Jacs felt as though she had been slapped. She looked around to see if anyone was listening and hissed so only Connor could hear: "Connor, they have my mother and Master Leschi. Alti-knows-where. They keep using them to blackmail me into doing whatever they want. From their standpoint, they don't *need* to play nice, they don't *need* to play fair, they don't *even need* to pretend to collaborate. I. Am. A. Pawn." Her voice wavered and she took a breath. "And they'll never see me as anything other than a Lowrian who flew too close to the sun."

"Jacs," he said softly, "you may not feel like it now, but you *are* our Queen. The contest picked you. The people chose you. You, above all others. Somehow it will all work out. It has to."

Jacs thought about the bloodstained parchment and a knot formed in her stomach. *But how long will that take?* she thought. *And how long can they hold on for?*

The wine was delivered, and sips were taken. Connor rubbed the pad of his thumb across the back of her hand, and she watched the rhythmic movement absently. *It will all work out*, Connor had said. She felt her heart rate slow and her mind detach from the pain she felt there.

Suddenly she was back in the sunlit second-story mess of Master Leschi's workshop. Phillip was humming to himself downstairs, and Master Leschi was unfurling the plans for their latest project.

"Something is wrong with the fulcrum," Master Leschi was saying. As she spoke, she weighted down each corner of the plans with an odd assortment of paperweights. "The effort needed to lift the load is too high given the amount of effort we hypothesized using. It's not efficient. So"—she looked up from the plans and fixed Jacs with a piercing gaze, a twinkle of excitement glittering in her eye and dancing at the corners of her mouth—"how do we fix it?"

Sitting with Connor now, Jacs felt her mentor's gaze on her once more. Master Leschi had always taught her that every question craved

an answer. Nothing had changed, she had simply forgotten her training for a moment. Hers was another problem in need of a solution. She just needed to figure it out. *So*, she thought, *how do I fix it?*

“Connor,” she began, “did your mother keep a journal? A personal journal, something she would have written her thoughts in?”

“A journal?” Connor thought for a moment. “The biographers collected most of her public writings shortly after . . .” He trailed off and picked up a different thread. “But as for something personal, I’m not sure. I could send a message to Father to see if he remembers.” Absently, he touched the Royal Advisor’s pin with his fingertips. It had belonged to the King.

The dowager King had left Basileia to stay in the coastal city of Terrelle shortly after Jacs had been crowned. He had shaken Jacs’s hand before leaving. His bony fingers were the texture of parchment, and his spine was stooped as though the world hung around his neck. “The sea air will do him good,” Connor said, but the crease of worry at his brow had only deepened the longer his father stayed away.

Jacs nodded. “Yes, write to him when you can, and send a messenger you trust.” She took another sip of wine and swirled the crimson liquid around the goblet. “I’ll meet with Lena and Anya for lunch today,” she said and looked over at his desk littered with parchment. “Can you join us?”

He smiled and kissed her. She felt the knot loosen in her chest ever so slightly, but the thought of her mother’s note carved deep creases between her brows.

“I wish I could, but I have a meeting,” he said.

“What meeting?”

Connor’s eyes shifted from hers to his table of parchment, “Just a meeting about, uh, this egg situation. I want to get a better understanding of it.”

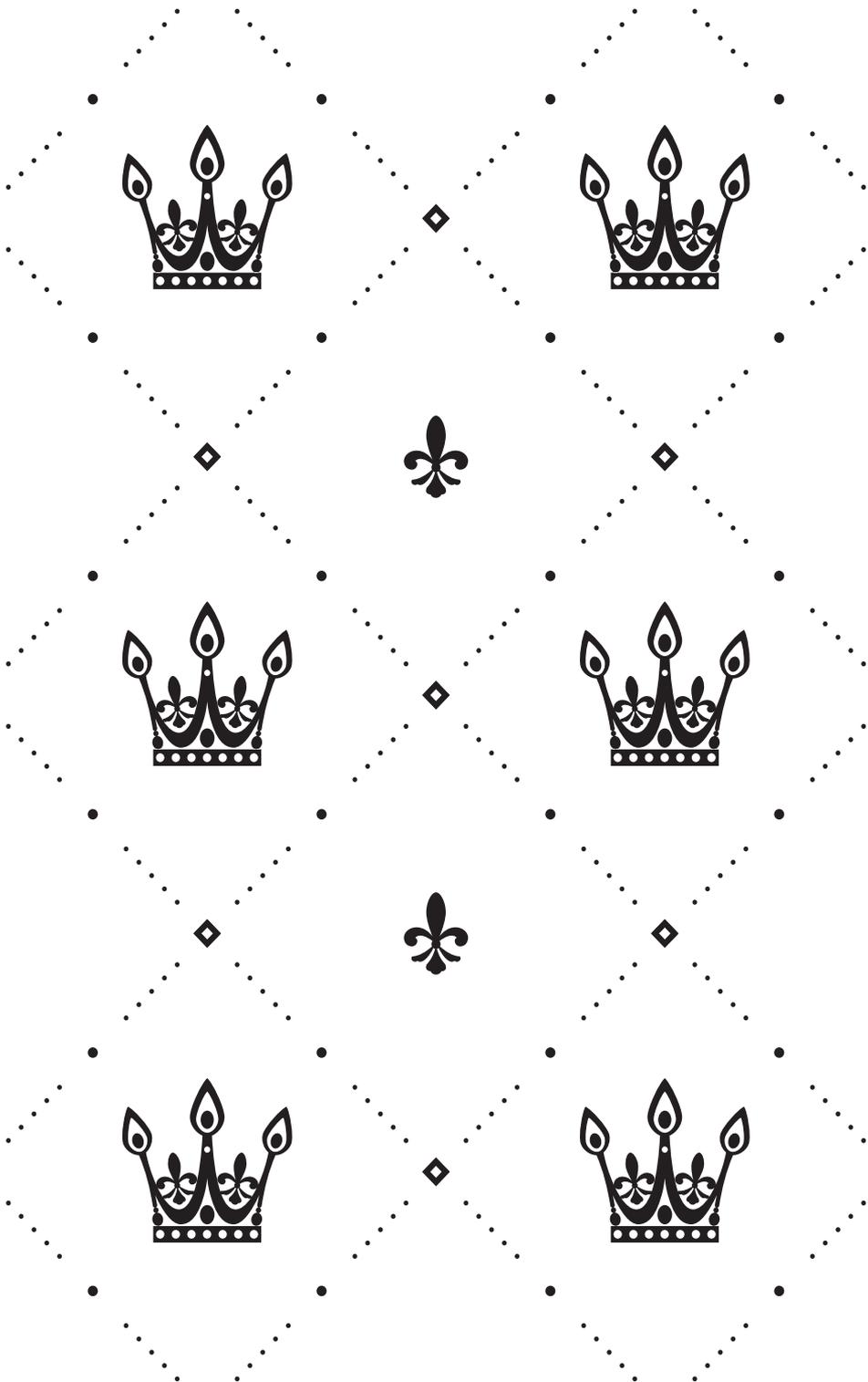
Jacs paused, then said, “Shouldn’t I be a part of that meeting too?”

“No, no. It’s not one I’d trouble you with,” Connor said quickly.

“Oh,” Jacs said quietly.

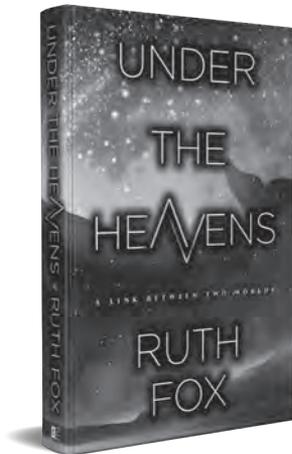
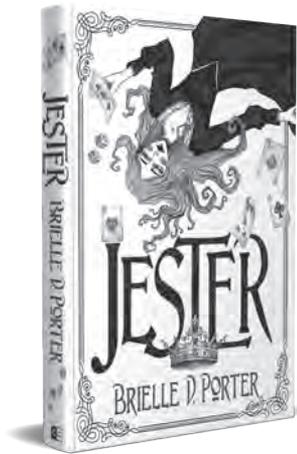
“I will tell you every boring detail tonight if you like,” Connor clasped her hands in his and kissed her knuckles.

She felt the corners of her mouth lift and pushed her doubts aside. “Deal,” she said.



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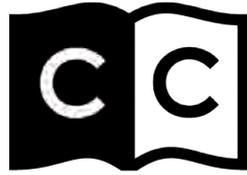
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Jacs, now the rightful Queen of Frea, seems to be Queen in title only. She scrambles to learn the customs and traditions of a Realm she had only read about in books. The Council of Four have her firmly under their thumb, and their ideas for the Queendom are oppressive and outdated. Their knowledge of her mother and Master Leschi's whereabouts is the only leverage they need to make the new Queen dance to their tune.

But Jacs is determined to find those who were taken from her and do what's right for her Queendom. But in her search for answers, Jacs uncovers a much darker truth from the Queendom's past that will forever change its future.



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