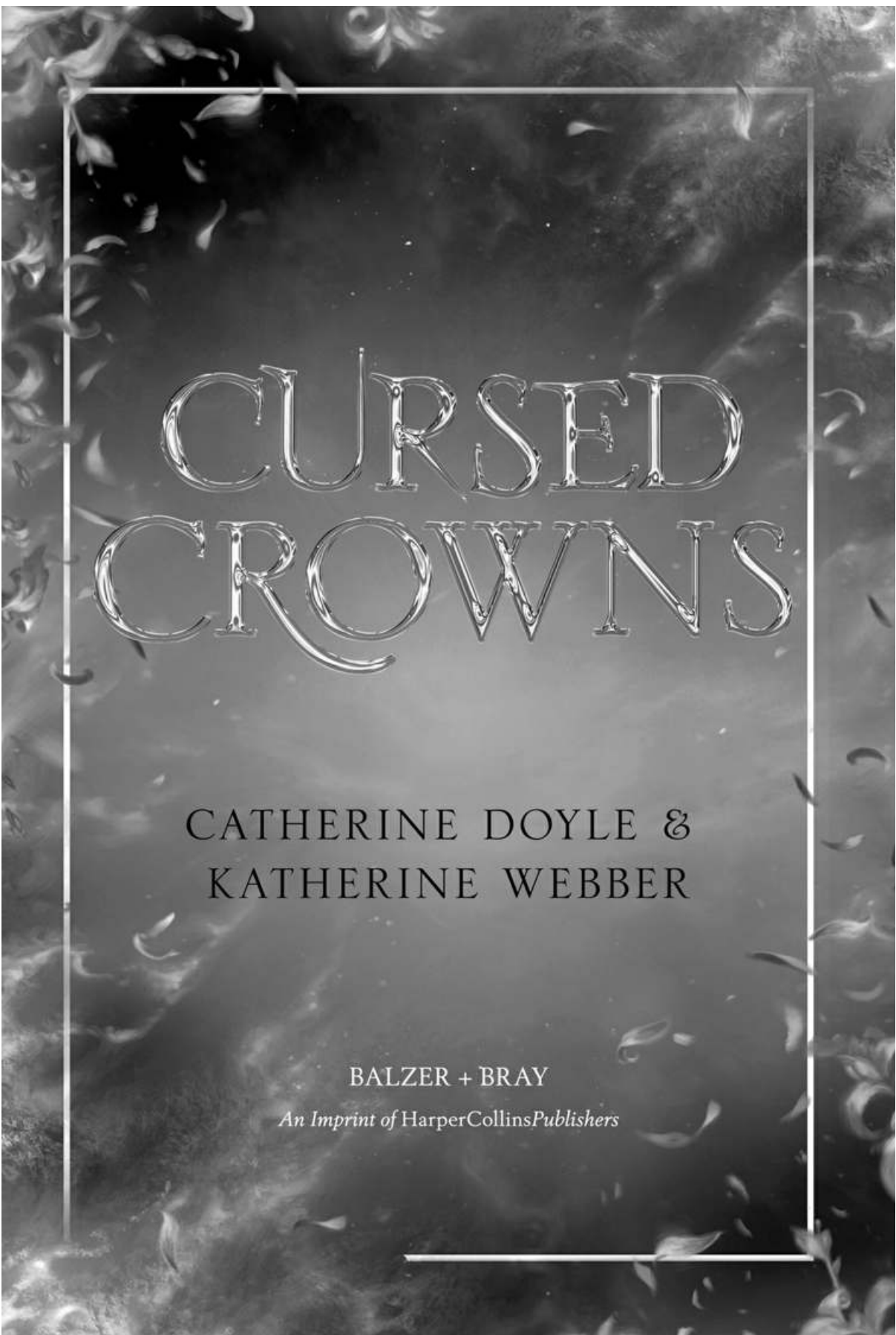


SISTERS UNITED. A KINGDOM DIVIDED.



CURSED CROWNS

CATHERINE DOYLE & KATHERINE WEBBER



CURSED CROWNS

CATHERINE DOYLE &
KATHERINE WEBBER

BALZER + BRAY

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

*For Princess Claire
A royally good agent, and an even better friend*

Epigraph



Break the ice to free the curse.
Kill one twin to save another.



Map



Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Map

1. Wren

2. Rose

3. Wren

4. Rose

5. Wren

6. Rose

7. Wren

8. Rose

9. Wren

10. Rose

11. Wren

12. Rose

13. Wren

14. Rose

15. Wren

16. Rose

17. Wren

18. Rose

19. Wren

20. Rose

21. Wren

22. Rose

23. Wren

24. Rose

25. Wren

26. Rose

27. Wren

28. Rose
29. Wren
30. Rose
31. Wren
32. Rose
33. Wren
34. Rose
35. Wren
36. Rose
37. Wren
38. Rose
39. Wren
40. Rose
41. Wren
42. Rose
43. Wren
44. Rose
45. Wren
46. Rose
47. Wren
48. Rose
49. Wren
50. Rose
51. Wren
52. Rose
53. Wren
54. Rose
55. Wren
56. Rose
57. Wren
58. Rose
59. Wren
60. Rose
61. Wren
62. Rose

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

Books by Catherine Doyle & Katherine Webber

Back Ad

Copyright
About the Publisher



1



Wren

Wren Greenrock's crown was too tight. The band squeezed her temples, pressing into her skull. She tried not to wince as she stood on the balcony at Anadawn Palace beside her twin sister, looking out over the kingdom they had fought so hard to claim. Wren still couldn't quite believe it was hers. Or at least half of it was. She and Rose had agreed to share it.

Still, her nerves were frayed. She had been worrying about this moment all morning, steeling herself for the worst. Given the events of the last few days, which had seen the unfortunate death of Rose's betrothed, Prince Ansel of Gevra, on their wedding day, followed swiftly by the welcome demise of Willem Rathborne, their traitorous Kingsbreath, Wren hadn't been expecting a big turnout, or even a positive one, but a jubilant sea of people had gathered just beyond the golden gates. Revelers from the nearby town of Eshlinn and beyond had come to wish the twins well on their coronation day. The crowd was so large it stretched all the way back to the woods. Thousands of grinning faces peered up at the white palace, their cheers rising on the summer breeze. They had come to celebrate Wren and Rose, the new twin queens of Eana.

The twins, for their part, stood on the balcony, bedecked in their finest gowns and brand-new crowns, absorbing their adoration like sunlight. Together, they glowed like a beacon—the promise of a new era, in which the witches and non-magical folk of Eana would live side by side in harmony, and all the old superstitions and festering mistrust would finally be laid to rest. It was a day of promise and possibility. Or at least it would

have been if Wren's head hadn't been pounding like a drum.

"Stop scowling," said Rose out of the side of her mouth. "They'll think you're unhappy."

Wren glanced sidelong at her sister. Rose's smile was full and gleaming. It had been perfectly fixed in place for almost an hour. She had been waving for just as long, too, her hand raised high above her head, so every man, woman, and child below could see it and know they were welcome. Cherished. Rose was a natural at this. She had been born for it.

Wren had never felt more like a novice in her life. Her smile had come easily at first, her surprise at hearing the cheers as they opened the doors to the balcony filling her with a rush of relief. But now her energy was waning. She had smiled and waved for so long her arm was exhausted. *She* was exhausted. It was no wonder. After all, she had grown up among the witches on the windswept beaches of Ortha in the west, far from the pomp and ceremony of Anadawn Palace and all the patience and decorum expected of a princess. "How long do we have to stand out here for?" she hissed. "All this waving is making me ravenous. And my head hurts."

Rose grabbed Wren's free hand. She squeezed, and a warm pulse traveled up Wren's arm. Healing magic. A heartbeat later, Wren's headache was gone.

"There." Rose blew out a breath as she released her. "No more complaining."

Wren refixed her smile and returned to waving. Her head felt better but her chest was still tight. Despite her healing magic, Rose couldn't mend her sister's heartache. It bloomed like a dark flower inside Wren, reminding her of Banba. Barely a day had passed since her steel-eyed, fearless grandmother had been taken from the burning Protector's Vault by King Alarik and his ruthless Gevran soldiers. She had been hauled onto a ship before Wren could get to her. The memory of that awful moment plagued Wren's every waking thought now, the unfairness of it writhing inside her like a snake.

Wren had become queen, just as her grandmother had always wanted, but Banba wasn't here to see it. Wasn't here to help her. Instead, King Alarik, the young, feral king from the northern continent, who harbored a dark fascination with witches, had taken her prisoner. But Wren intended to change that. She had made a vow to herself—and to Rose—that she was going to find a way to rescue her grandmother from the icy maw of Gevra.

Just as soon as she'd finished smiling and waving.

Wren caught the moment Rose's gaze flickered down to the courtyard, where Shen Lo was reclining along the edge of the fountain that marked

the entryway to the inner palace. He had one arm slung over his forehead to keep the sun from his eyes, the other drifting in the crystalline water.

Wren could tell by his smirk that he wasn't sleeping. She didn't have to see his eyes to know he was enjoying the spectacle of Rose glowing in her natural habitat. And Wren squirming like a fish out of water.

"Wren, look!" squealed Rose, grabbing her sister's hand again. "They're throwing flowers over the gates!"

Wren looked up just in time to see a bright red rose land in the courtyard. And then another, and another. There was an entire bouquet scattered along the stones—pinks and yellows and reds and purples—and still more sailing over the gates. "Roses," said Wren with a chuckle. "They really do love you."

"They'll love you, too," said Rose, blowing a kiss to the crowd. A cheer went up. Rose did an elaborate twirl, garnering another. "Just as soon as they properly get to know you."

"As long as they don't start flinging dead wrens over the walls."

"Oh, don't be so morose."

Wren made a show of blowing a kiss to the crowd. More whoops and hollers rang out. Down in the courtyard, Shen was laughing, his teeth winking in the afternoon sun.

"This really is too easy," said Wren, blowing another kiss. "Maybe I should do a cartwheel."

Rose grabbed her sister's elbow. "Don't you dare!"

Wren burst into laughter.

Just then, the crowd surged forward, causing the gates to groan. Arms threaded through the golden railings, grasping for more space, as a single rotten tomato sailed over the spires. It soared as if in slow motion, getting bigger as it came toward them. Thankfully, it fell short of the balustrade and landed in the courtyard with a determined *splat*.

A ragged shout rose above the cheers. "OUT WITH THE WITCHES!"

Down in the courtyard, Shen jolted upright.

Rose's smile faltered.

Wren stopped waving. "I think we're done for the day."

"Ignore it," said Rose, quickly regaining her composure. "It's one tomato."

"Two," said Wren as another rotten piece of fruit vaulted over the gates. She watched Shen flit across the courtyard, trying to spot the protester among the masses, or perhaps to discern if there was more than one. The crowd was still surging forward, as though something—or someone—was pushing them.

When the second tomato landed in the fountain, Rose stepped back from the balcony. “Very well,” she said, blowing one last theatrical kiss to the crowd. Another cheer went up, drowning out the next shout, but Wren swore she could hear the word “*witch*” on the wind. The twins retreated from the balcony, both of them making a show of laughing gaily until they returned to the sanctity of the throne room, where the balcony doors slammed shut behind them.

They stopped laughing in the same breath.

“Well, that was concerning,” said Wren.

Rose wrinkled her nose. “What a waste of perfectly good food.”

“I knew all those cheers were too good to be true.” Wren scraped her hands through her hair, dislodging her crown. There. *Much better*. “Eana doesn’t want to be ruled by witches, Rose. Even one they know.”

Rose waved her concerns away. “Oh, please. That little protest wasn’t even enough to make a bowl of soup. There’s no need to be so dramatic.”

But Wren couldn’t help it. Without Banba here, everything felt twisted, wrong. There was a pit in her stomach, and those four simple words—*OUT WITH THE WITCHES*—were only making it worse.

“I’m just trying to be realistic.” Wren’s footsteps echoed after her as she marched to her throne. The room was the biggest in the entire palace, the ceiling covered in shining gold leaf. The walls were hung with gilt-framed oil paintings and emerald drapes adding the barest sliver of warmth to the chamber. A couple of hours ago, it had been teeming with envoys and nobles from every corner of the country—as well as the Ortha witches—but it was empty now, save for the twins and the guards standing watch over them.

Wren sank onto the velvet seat and pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to calm her rioting thoughts. Willem Rathborne might be dead, but he had left them a legacy of problems. Their evil Kingsbreath had spent eighteen years preaching the same hate as the kingdom’s long-dead Protector and poisoning the country against the witches. Wren and Rose would have to do more than wave from a balcony for a few hours to hope to undo all of it. And until they did, the witches who had come from Ortha only days ago would have to remain at Anadawn, where they could be protected from those in the kingdom who still wished them harm.

Wren massaged the new ache in her temples. If their grandmother were here, she would know exactly what to do. She would lay her hand on Wren’s shoulders and strengthen her with a few choice words, as only Banba could.

“You’re thinking about Banba, aren’t you?” Suddenly, Rose was

before Wren, wearing the same look of concern. “No wonder you’re so anxious. I told you, we’re going to get her back.”

“When?” said Wren impatiently. “How?”

“I’m going to write a strategic letter to King Alarik. Monarch to monarch,” said Rose with such sureness Wren dared to hope it might work. “I imagine emotions are still running high after the death of poor Ansel.” Rose flinched at the mention of the prince, no doubt recalling how desperately she had tried to save him, only to fail. “Perhaps a little diplomacy—and a well-worded apology—will do a world of good. I’ll see if he’s willing to open some kind of negotiation for Banba’s release. Once the crowd disperses, I’ll go down to the mews at once.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“I’d rather you left the diplomacy to me.” Rose patted her sister’s hand. “A queen you might be, but it is going to take awhile for you to learn what it means to be royal.”

Wren glared up at her sister. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I can see that dagger peeking out of your bodice and I know you’ve got another one fastened to your ankle,” said Rose good-naturedly. “And in this delicate negotiation, my darling sister, the quill will be *far* mightier than the sword.”

“Fine. But if you’re wrong and something happens to Banba, I’m going to drive a big shiny sword through Alarik Felsing’s frosted heart.”

“Oh, Wren, I am never wrong.” Rose picked up her skirts and flounced away, tossing a winning smile over her shoulder.



2



Rose

An hour or so later, after composing her letter to King Alarik, Rose held her head high as she strode through the palace corridors. She nodded and smiled at passing servants and soldiers, pretending everything was going perfectly to plan. Pretending her reign wasn't off to a truly terrible start.

Back in the throne room, she'd put on a brave face for Wren, whose temper was always flickering inside her, ready to erupt into a blaze. But as the day wore on, Rose could feel the cold tongue of her fear licking at her toes, and she knew if she let herself give in to it, it would devour her.

So she would simply kick the fear away. As she had always done.

Now that the crowd had dispersed, she needed air and a moment to pull herself together. It was beginning to feel like the stone walls of Anadawn were closing in on her, like if she didn't get out of the palace immediately, she'd be trapped inside it forever.

She pushed on the door that led out to the courtyard, only for it to refuse to budge. Rose bit her tongue to stop herself from screaming out in frustration. She winced as she shoved it with her shoulder. With one strong push, it groaned open. And then, at last, she was outside, in the fresh afternoon air.

Rose wandered into her garden, at once calmed by the familiar sweetness of her roses. They were at their peak now, bursting into bloom all over, as if each one was trying to outdo the next. She lingered at a vibrant yellow rose bush and closed her eyes, inhaling its scent.

"Lucky flowers," said a voice right behind her. "I wish you'd smile at

me like that.”

Rose yelped, lost her footing, and nearly toppled into the thorns.

Strong hands caught her waist. “Careful, Majesty.”

For a blissful moment, Rose allowed herself to lean into Shen Lo, resting her head on the hard planes of his chest, breathing him in as she had her roses. Then she came to her senses and stepped away from him.

“You shouldn’t sneak up on people that way,” she chided.

“And you shouldn’t close your eyes to your surroundings when you’re out here all by yourself,” said Shen. “Surely, I taught you better than that, Majesty.”

“Perhaps I need more lessons,” said Rose coyly. “And anyway, it’s my rose garden. I’m as safe as can be out here.”

“Well, you are now.” Shen stuck his hands in his pockets, where Rose assumed he had stashed at least three daggers, and flashed a grin that made her knees weak. It was hard to forget they had shared their first kiss in this very place.

And then the following day, Shen had kissed her again, in the heat of battle in the Protector’s Vault, though they hadn’t spoken of it since. They had built a wall around that morning, both of them dutifully pretending that Rose hadn’t almost married Prince Ansel, that the dagger Willem Rathborne had thrown at Wren hadn’t ended up in the prince’s heart, causing him to bleed out in Rose’s arms. Sometimes Rose wondered if she had imagined that brazen kiss. She had certainly allowed herself to imagine many others in the time since.

Shen’s smile faded. “Are you all right? The shouting in the crowd this morning . . .”

“I’m fine,” said Rose, the lie sour in her mouth. She turned from temptation and walked into the garden. Better to look at her roses than into Shen’s eyes. After all, she had come out here to gather herself, not unravel in his arms. He fell into step with her. “What are you still doing out here anyway?”

“I was thinking about picking you a bouquet. Is it bad luck to gift a queen her own flowers on her coronation day?”

“Yes.” Rose chuckled as she looked up at him. “Why do I feel like that isn’t the full truth?”

“All right, maybe I was walking the ramparts. Scanning every face in that crowd to see who was out there throwing rotten fruit at you. I like to know who my enemies are.”

“Shen, really, it was just a tomato or two.”

“That’s how it starts,” he said darkly. “Dissent is dangerous. A

protester today could be a rebel tomorrow.”

“It’s early yet,” said Rose, as much to herself as to Shen. “Wren and I will win them over.”

Shen huffed a sigh. He lifted one of her curls with his finger, settling it behind her ear. “You are good at that,” he murmured.

Rose grinned. “I know.”

“I just can’t help—”

“Worrying?”

He winked. “I’m not used to worrying, Rose. It doesn’t suit me.”

“Nor me.” She took his hand in hers. “Can’t we set our worries aside and just enjoy today?”

“That’s all I want.” Shen gently tugged her toward him. He was so close now she could see every shade of brown in his dark eyes, the freckle above his brow that she’d somehow never noticed before. “To enjoy this.”

Rose bit her lip. Suddenly, she was feeling dangerously light-headed. “It’s the middle of the day,” she said, a little breathless. “If people saw us together . . .”

“They would think we’re . . . fond of each other.” He dipped his chin. “Is that so bad, Rose?”

“Yes,” she whispered, but she couldn’t quite remember why. All sensible thoughts eddied out of her mind until she could feel nothing but want pulsing between them, then Shen’s arms around her waist, his breath warm on her cheek, his lips nearly brushing against hers—

The bell in the clock tower chimed and Rose jolted backward. The world came crashing in once more, and, with it, the swell of her duties. For goodness’ sake, she was a queen now, not some lovestruck, desert-stranded princess. And she had made a promise to Wren. “I’m afraid I have to visit the mews. It can’t wait.”

Shen’s shoulders slumped. “Then I’ll resume my patrol.”

“There are hundreds of soldiers at Anadawn,” Rose reminded him. “You can take a rest, you know.”

He curled his fists. “Not until every tomato in this land is hunted down and destroyed.”

They dissolved into laughter, Rose threading her arm through his as he walked her down to the mews, both of them pretending that the woes of the past were behind them and the future was theirs for the taking.

Dear King Alarik,

I would like to convey my deepest condolences on the regrettable death of your brother, Prince Ansel, who was a dear friend to my

sister and me, and to our country. As you must now be aware, our grandmother Banba was taken—mistakenly, I'm sure—by one of your soldiers in the kerfuffle, and she is very much missed here at Anadawn. Perhaps we can discuss the terms of her imminent return? Despite everything that has happened between our great countries, I believe there is a world in which Eana and Gevra can be allies once more. I hope very much that you agree.

Yours sincerely,

Her Majesty Queen Rose Valhart of Eana



3



Wren

Thirteen days after the twins' coronation, when roses and rotten fruit had been hurled over the golden gates, Wren, dressed no less finely in a sweeping violet gown embroidered with golden thread, and with her crown still digging into her scalp, found herself back in the throne room.

"You're slouching," said Rose, who had been sitting ramrod straight all morning, and yet somehow still possessed the composure of a queen in an oil painting.

"I'm trying to take a subtle nap," said Wren without bothering to stifle her yawn. Last night, she had dreamed of Banba again. Her sleep had been fitful, her every thought haunted by visions of her grandmother, frail and suffering, all alone in Gevra. Back at Ortha, Banba had spent years teaching Wren to be brave in the face of danger, to be clever and resourceful, but she had never taught Wren how to face a world without her grandmother at her side. That was a fear Wren was not able to conquer. It plagued her even as she slept.

Rose pinched her hand, jolting her awake.

"Ow! Don't harm the queen," snapped Wren.

"Then start acting like one," said Rose. "Today is important."

Over the last two weeks, Wren had come to learn that every day as a queen was important. Especially as a queen of a new world that welcomed the witches, that saw them not just as equals, but as integral to the prosperity of the kingdom. There was much to do, and untangling the ancient tapestry of Eana from the threads of anti-witch sentiment that had

been stitched into it under the legacy of the Great Protector was no easy task. The Kingsbreath, Willem Rathborne, although dead, had cast a long shadow over Anadawn. There were hundreds of laws to discard. Treaties to assess, territories to resettle, and new edicts to sign. Proclamations to make. Governors to appoint.

Governors to fire.

Eana was home to the witches again. No. Eana *belonged* to the witches, and yet most of them were still sheltering at Anadawn Palace. It was Wren's and Rose's solemn duty to restore the kingdom to its former glory without the bloodshed and conflict that had once destroyed it, so that their kin could venture safely beyond the golden palace gates and make their lives in whatever part of the country they wished to. It was busy work. *Hard* work.

And then there was today.

As part of a monthly tradition established centuries ago by King Thormund Valhart and insisted upon by Chapman, the scurrying palace steward, the twin queens were holding their first-ever Kingdom's Call. An entire day dedicated to personally receiving visitors (and, more often than not, their complaints) from every corner of Eana.

Already the new queens had presided over a lengthy land dispute between rival farmers in the Errinwilde, had approved a delivery of six hundred barrels of grain for the sprawling town of Norbrook, *and* had appointed no less than fourteen new governors to preside over the various provinces of Eana. They had also received formal banquet invitations from almost every noble family in the country and had even welcomed a missive from the neighboring country of Caro, whose queen, Eliziana, had sent her warmest wishes, alongside three crates of summer wine and a beautiful olive tree, which now stood proudly on the throne room balcony.

And yet, despite such well-received gifts, the only royal Wren truly wished to hear from was continuing his infuriating silence. Despite Rose's diplomatic letter to King Alarik—and the further three that had followed it—the Gevran king had yet to respond. For all Wren knew, Banba was already dead. The very thought made her want to run all the way to Gevra and rip that feral king apart with her bare hands.

"It's almost lunchtime," said Rose encouragingly. "I've asked Cam to make his delicious beef stew again. It's your favorite."

Wren picked at her nails. "So long as there's wine."

Whoops and hollers reached her from the courtyard, the familiar trill of Rowena's laugh finding her through the open window. Over the last two weeks, the witches of Ortha had made themselves at home at Anadawn

Palace, much to the chagrin of the servants and more than a few guards. Wren caught a glimpse of her friend's tempest magic now as Rose's favorite ballgown floated across the balcony like a ghost.

A laugh sprang from Wren, earning her an admonishing glare from her sister.

"For the hundredth time, Wren, can you please tell Rowena to stop treating Anadawn as her personal fairground? And what is she doing in my closet? She shouldn't even be in my room!"

Thea, Banba's wife, who was attending the Kingdom's Call in her new role as the Queensbreath, sighed. "I sent Rowena and Bryony to pick apples in the orchard hours ago. I thought if they could find a way of putting their magic to use around here, it would go a long way to helping them fit in."

The ghostly dress began to cartwheel as the wind picked up. "I don't think they care about fitting in," said Wren, who desperately wanted to be outside cartwheeling, too. "How many more people do we have to see before lunch?"

Rose looked to Chapman.

The steward's finely curated moustache twitched as he glanced at his never-ending scroll. "Just twelve. Wait, no. Thirteen. The Morwell family have put in a last-minute request for an audience. They wish to raise a dispute with their farrier. They suspect he's been stealing horseshoes."

Wren closed her eyes. "Rose. I am losing the will to live."

"Do try to salvage it," said Chapman pointedly. "The Morwells have long been allies of the throne and are a family of considerable influence here in Eshlinn."

"Archer Morwell," said Wren, suddenly recalling the name. She snapped her eyes open. "I'm sure Celeste knows one of their sons. Rather well, if I remember correctly. Apparently, he has *very* impressive shoulders."

"Wren!" hissed Rose. "That is entirely improper throne room conversation!"

"Oh, calm down. No one cares." Wren swept her hand around, indicating the ten bored-looking soldiers in their midst. Captain Davers, the stern-faced head of the royal guard, was standing sentry by the doorway, keeping a watchful eye over the proceedings. And then there was only Thea, who was making a valiant effort to stifle her chuckle at the mention of Rose's best friend's dalliance.

Chapman cleared his throat awkwardly. "Onward." He glanced at his scroll. "Captain Davers, send in the messenger from Gallanth, please." A