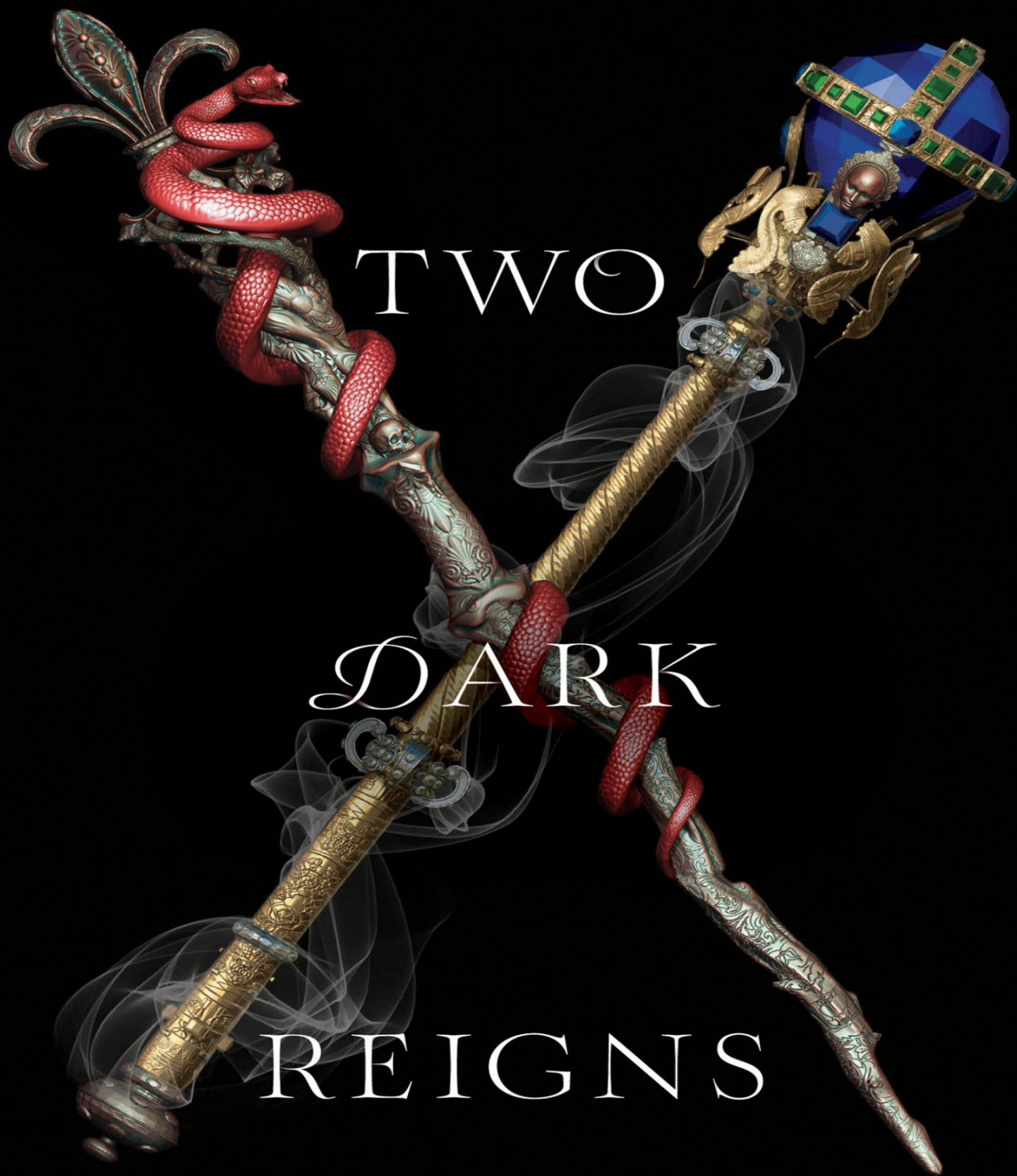


Book 3 in the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Three Dark Crowns series

KENDARE BLAKE



ONE QUEEN RULES, ANOTHER QUEEN RISES.

TWO

*D*ARK

REIGNS

KENDARE BLAKE

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CAST OF CHARACTERS



INDRID DOWN

Capital City, Home of Queen Katharine

THE ARRONS

Natalia Arron

Matriarch of the Arron family. Head of the Black Council.

Genevieve Arron

Younger sister to Natalia

Antonin Arron

Younger brother to Natalia

Pietyr Renard

Natalia's nephew by her brother Christophe

ROLANTH

Home of Queen Mirabella

THE WESTWOODS

Sara Westwood

Matriarch of the Westwood family. Affinity: water

Bree Westwood

Daughter of Sara Westwood, friend to the queen. Affinity: fire

WOLF SPRING

Home of Queen Arsinoe

THE MILONES

Cait Milone

Matriarch of the Milone family. Familiar: Eva, a crow

Ellis Milone

Husband to Cait and father to her children. Familiar: Jake, a white spaniel

Caragh Milone

Elder daughter of Cait, banished to the Black Cottage. Familiar: Juniper, a brown hound

Madrigal Milone

Younger daughter of Cait. Familiar: Aria, a crow

Juillenne “Jules” Milone

Daughter of Madrigal. The strongest naturalist in decades and friend to the queen. Familiar: Camden, a mountain cat

THE SANDRINS

Matthew Sandrin

Eldest of the Sandrin sons. Former betrothed of Caragh Milone

Joseph Sandrin

Middle Sandrin son. Friend of Arsinoe. Banished to the mainland for five years

OTHERS

Luke Gillespie

Proprietor of Gillespie's Bookshop. Friend of Arsinoe. Familiar: Hank, a black-and-green rooster

William "Billy" Chatworth Jr.

Foster brother to Joseph Sandrin. Suitor to the queens.

Mrs. Chatworth

Jane

Emilia Vatos, *A warrior from Bastian City*

Mathilde, *An oracle*

THE TEMPLE

High Priestess Luca

Priestess Rho Murtra

Elizabeth, *Initiate and friend to Queen Mirabella*

THE BLACK COUNCIL

Natalia Arron, *poisoner*

Genevieve Arron, *poisoner*

Lucian Arron, *poisoner*

Antonin Arron, *poisoner*

Allegra Arron, *poisoner*

Paola Vend, *poisoner*

Lucian Marlowe, *poisoner*

Margaret Beaulin, *war-gifted*

Renata Hargrove, *giftless*

MAP



THE BLACK COTTAGE

400 YEARS BEFORE THE BIRTH OF MIRABELLA, ARSINOE, AND KATHARINE



The labor, when it began, was hard and full of blood. Nothing less was to be expected from a war queen, especially one so battle-hardened as Queen Philomene.

The Midwife pressed a cool cloth to the queen's forehead, but the queen shoved it away.

"The pain is nothing," Queen Philomene said. "I welcome this last fight."

"You think there will be no more war for you in Louis's country?" the Midwife asked. "Even if your gift fades after you leave the island, I cannot imagine that."

The queen looked toward the door, where Louis, her king-consort, could be glimpsed pacing back and forth. Her black eyes glittered from the excitement of the labor. Her black hair shone slick with sweat.

"He wants this to be over. He did not know what he was getting into when he got me."

Nor did anyone. Queen Philomene's entire reign was marked by battle. Under her, the capital city was overrun by warriors. She built long ships and plundered the coastal villages of every nation state except for that of her king-consort. But now, all that was over. Eight years of brutal, warrior rule. A short reign, even by war queen standards, but the island was exhausted by it nonetheless. War queens were glory and intimidation. Protection. It was

not only her husband who was relieved when the Goddess sent the queen her triplets.

She strained as another pain struck her, and she turned her knee to see more blood darken the bedding.

“You are doing well,” the Midwife lied. But what did she really know? She was young and new in service at the Black Cottage. A poisoner by gift and therefore a clever healer, but though she had aided in many births, there was no true preparation for the birth of queens.

“I am,” Philomene agreed, and smiled. “It is like a war queen to bleed so much. But I still think I will die of this.”

The Midwife dipped the cloth back into the cool water and wrung it out, ready in case Philomene should let her use it. Perhaps she would. After all, who would see? To the island, a queen was effectively dead once her triplets were born. The horses to take her and Louis to their river barge and on to their ship were already saddled and waiting, and once gone, Philomene and Louis would never return. Even the doting little Midwife would forget her the moment the babies were out. She put on a show of caring, but her only aim was to keep Philomene alive long enough to bear the triplets.

Philomene glanced at the table of herbs and clean black cloths, jars of potions to dull the pain, all refused, of course. There were knives upon it as well. To cut the new queens free should the old one prove too weak. Philomene smiled. The Midwife was a small meek thing. Her trying to slice them out might be a feat worth watching.

The pain passed, and Philomene sighed.

“They are in a hurry,” she said. “As I was. In a hurry since I was born, to make my mark. Perhaps I knew I would have a short time to do it in. Or perhaps it was the strain of rushing that shortened my life. You came from the temple, did you not? Before serving in solitude here?”

“I trained there, my queen. At the temple in Prynn. But I never took the oaths.”

“Of course not. I can see that there are no bracelets marked into your arms. I am not blind.” She strained again, and more blood gushed forth. The

pains were coming faster.

The Midwife grasped her by the chin and pulled her eyelids back.

“You are weakening.”

“I am not.” Philomene fell back on the bed. She placed her hands atop her great distended belly in a near-motherly gesture. But she would not ask about the baby queens. They were not hers to wonder about. All belonged to the Goddess and the Goddess alone.

Philomene struggled back up onto her elbows. A look of grim determination set on her face. She snapped her fingers for the Midwife to take her place between her knees.

“You are ready to push,” the Midwife said. “It will be all right; you are strong.”

“I thought you just said I was weakening,” Philomene grumbled.

The first queen born was born silent. Breathing, but she did not even cry when the Midwife slapped her across the back. She was small, and well-formed, and very pink for such a hard, messy birth. The Midwife held her up for Philomene to see, and for a moment, queens’ blood flowed between them through the connection of the cord.

“Leonine,” Philomene said, giving the little queen her name. “A naturalist.”

The Midwife repeated it aloud and took the baby away to be cleaned and placed in a bassinet, then covered in a blanket of bright green and embroidered with flowers. It was not long before the next baby came, screaming this time, and with tiny, clenched fists.

“Isadora,” the queen said, and the baby wailed and blinked her wide black eyes. “An oracle.”

“Isadora. An oracle,” the Midwife repeated. And she took her away to be wrapped in a blanket of pale gray and yellow, the colors of the seers.

The third queen born arrived in a rush of blood, as if on a wave. It was so much and so gruesome that Philomene’s mouth opened to announce a new war queen. But those were not the words that came out.

“Roxane. An elemental.”

The Midwife repeated the final name and turned away, cleaning the baby before wrapping her in blue and placing her in the last bassinet. Philomene breathed heavily in the birthing bed. She had been right. She could feel it. The birth had killed her. Strong as she was, she might survive long enough to be bound up and put into the saddle, but it would be a body that Louis sailed home with, to be entombed in his family crypt or perhaps pushed overboard into the sea. Her duty to the island was finished, and the island would have no more say in her fate.

“Midwife!” Philomene groaned as another pain tore through her.

“Yes, yes,” the Midwife replied soothingly. “It is only the afterbirth. It will pass.”

“It is not the afterbirth. It is not—”

She grimaced and bit her lip against one more push.

Another baby slipped out from the war queen’s womb. Easily and without fuss. She opened her black eyes and took an enormous breath. Another baby born. Another queen.

“A blue queen,” the Midwife murmured. “A fourth born.”

“Give her to me.”

The Midwife only stared.

“Give her to me now!”

She scooped the baby up, and Philomene snatched her from her hands.

“Illiann,” Philomene said. “An elemental.” Her exhausted, depleted face broke into a smile. Any disappointment of there being no new war queen vanished. For here was a great destiny. A blessing, for the entire island. And she, Philomene, had done it.

“Illiann,” the shocked Midwife repeated. “An elemental. The Blue Queen.”

Philomene laughed. She raised the child in her arms.

“Illiann!” she shouted. “The Blue Queen!”

The days spent waiting for someone to arrive at the Black Cottage were long. After the birth of the Blue Queen, the messengers raced back to their cities

with the news. They had been at the Black Cottage, their horses saddled the moment the queen's labor began.

A fourth born. It was such a rare occurrence that it was thought by some to be mere legend. At the Midwife's announcement, none of the young messengers had known what to do. She had finally needed to screech at them.

"A Blue Queen!" she had shouted. "Blessed of the Goddess! All must come. All the families! And the High Priestess as well! Ride!"

Had only the triplets been born, just three families and a small party of priestesses would have come to the cottage. The Traverses for the naturalist queen. The burgeoning Westwoods for the elemental. And the Lermonts for the poor little oracle queen, to oversee her drowning. But the arrival of a Blue Queen meant that the heads of the strongest families from all the island's gifts would come. The Vatro's clan, who inhabited the capital and the war city of Bastian. And even the Arrons, the poisoners from Prynn.

Inside the cottage, beneath the dark brown beams supporting the ceiling, four bassinets sat beside the eastern wall to catch the sunlight of morning. All were quiet, except for the baby in the light gray blanket. The little oracle fussed almost constantly. Perhaps because, being an oracle, she knew what was to happen.

Poor little oracle queen. Her fate had always been sealed. Since the time of Mad Queen Elsabet, who used her prophecy gift to murder three whole families she said had plotted against her, oracle queens were immediately drowned. After wresting power away from Elsabet, the Black Council had made the decree. They would not risk such an unjust massacre again.

In the days following the birth, the Midwife burned the old queen's bedding. It could not be cleaned, so soaked through with blood. She did not wonder where the old queen was or how she fared. Looking at the state of the sheets, she could only assume Philomene was dead.

Just over a week past the birth, the first of the families arrived. The Lermonts, the oracles from the northwest city of Sunpool, nearest to the Black Cottage, though they also insisted they had foreseen the child's coming

and had been ready to travel when the messenger arrived. They looked across the tops of the four black bassinets. They looked down gravely at the little oracle queen.

A day later came the Westwoods, new in their elemental dominance and foolish. They cooed over the elemental queen and brought her a gift of a blanket colored with bright blue dye.

“We had it made for her,” said Isabelle Westwood, the head of the family. “There is no reason she should not have it, even though her life is short.”

After them, the Traverses arrived from Sealhead, and that same evening the Arrons and the hard-riding Vatrozes arrived within minutes of each other to bear silent witness. The Vatrozes, rich and well-gifted from the war queen’s reign, brought the High Priestess with them from the capital.

The Midwife knelt before the High Priestess and gave the queens’ names. When she said, “Illiann,” the High Priestess clasped her hands together.

“A Blue Queen,” she murmured, and went toward the baby. “I can scarcely believe it. I thought the messengers had gotten it wrong.” She reached down and took up the child, cradling her in the crook of her white-robed arms.

“An elemental Blue Queen,” said Isabelle Westwood, and the High Priestess shushed her with a look.

“The Blue Queen belongs to us all. She will not grow up in an elemental house. She will grow up in the capital. In Indrid Down. With me.”

“But—” the Midwife sputtered. Every head in the room turned toward her. They had forgotten the Midwife was even there.

“You, Midwife, will cull the queen’s sisters. And then you will come with us.”

The Midwife lowered her head.

The naturalist queen was left in the forest, for the earth and the animals. The little doomed oracle was drowned in the stream. By the time the elemental queen was placed on the tiny raft, to be pushed out into the water and on to the sea, both she and the Midwife were weeping. Leonine, Isadora,

and Roxane. Returned to the Goddess, who had given them Illiann to rule instead.

Illiann, blessed and Blue.

THE VOLROY



Queen Katharine sits for her portrait painting in one of the high, west-facing rooms of the West Tower, just one floor below her own apartments. In her left hand, she holds an empty bottle, which in the painting will become a beautiful poison. Curled around her right is a coil of white rope that the painter's brush will turn into a likeness of Sweetheart.

She turns her head to the window to look out over Indrid Down: dark brown roofs of the north-end row houses and roads disappearing into the hills, the sky dotted with smoke from chimneys and cut through by the tall, finely built stone structures of the central city. It is a calm and beautiful day. Workers work. Families eat and laugh and play. And she woke up that morning in Pietyr's arms. All is well. Better than well, now that her troublesome sisters are dead.

"Please raise your chin, Queen Katharine. And straighten your back."

She does as she is told, and the painter smiles a little fearfully. He is the finest master painter in all of Indrid Down, quite used to painting poisoners and the common poisoner props. But this is no mere portrait. This is the Queen Crowned's portrait. And working on it makes even the finest master sweat.

They have set her so the view through the window behind her right shoulder will show Greavesdrake Manor. It was her idea, though the Arrons will take credit for it. She did not do it for them, but for Natalia, a small thing to honor the great head of the family, the woman who raised Katharine as if she were her own daughter. Because of her, Greavesdrake will always be