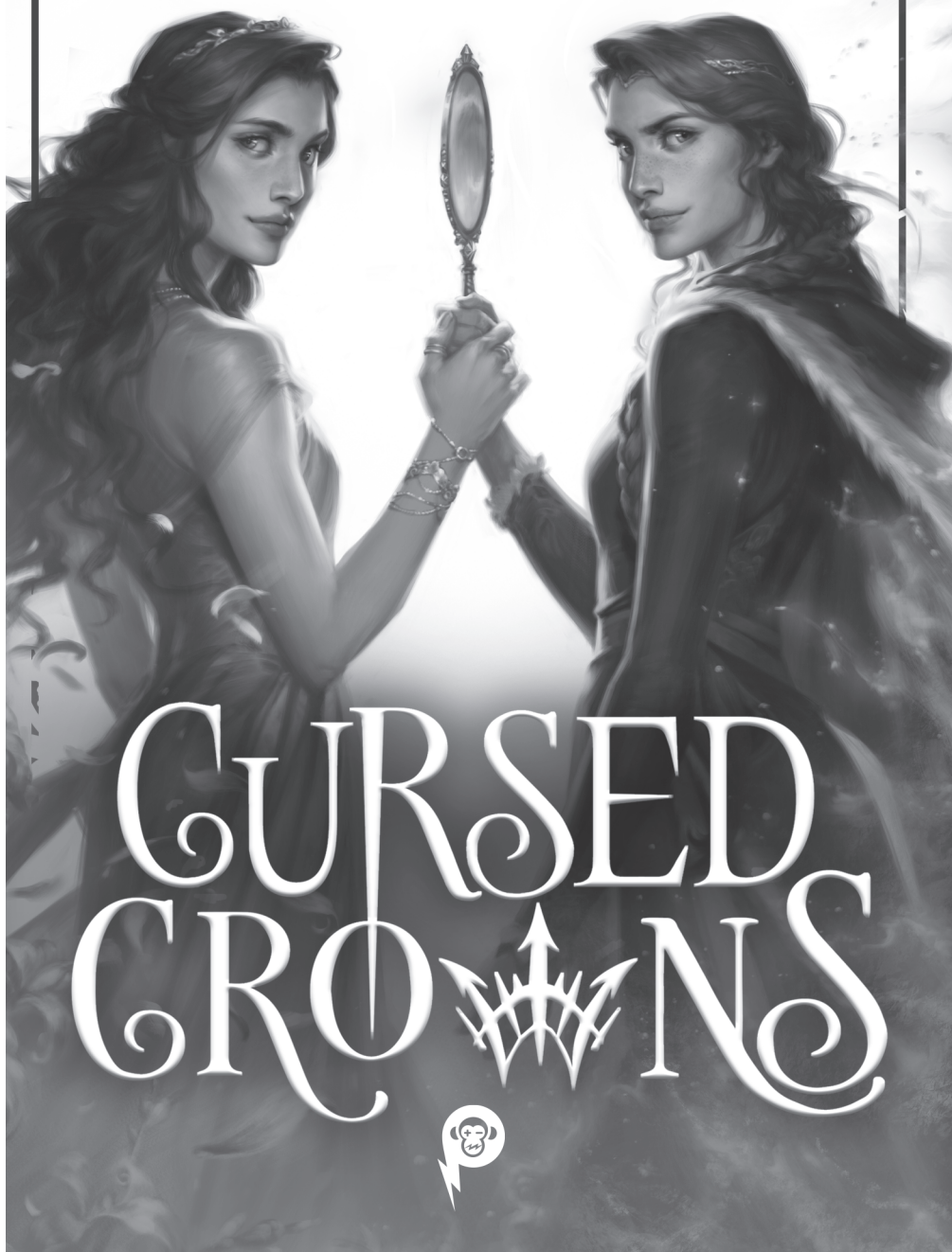


CURSED
CROWNS



CATHERINE & KATHERINE
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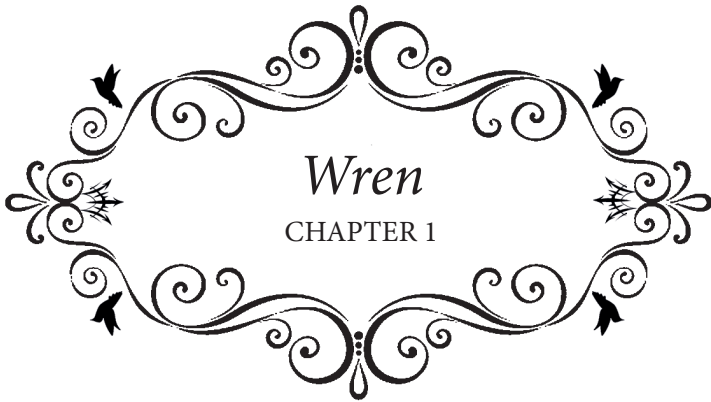
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Break the ice to free the curse.

Kill one twin to save another.



A decorative, ornate floral frame with intricate scrollwork and leaf-like patterns, surrounding the chapter title.

Wren
CHAPTER 1

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. Revellers 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 on 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 travelled 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 on to a ship before Wren could get to her. Her final moments 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, she was a prisoner of King Alarik, the young, feral king from the northern continent, who harboured a dark fascination with witches. 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 towards 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 piece of rotten 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 – was 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 gilded 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 on to 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 a while 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.