

# Queen Cells

Book two in the Royal Jelly Series

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BOOK 2 IN THE ROYAL JELLY SERIES





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To my Cousin Sylvia (Sibby) for believing in the first book and sharing your honest feedback. Your encouragement is inspiring.

# ONE

A silence so deafening it could drive a monk insane thrums throughout the castle.

The slow ticks of the clock mounted on the wall grow louder and louder with each passing second as I stare out into the empty hall framed by my office door. For a moment, I can almost imagine that the entire castle is empty and I'm alone. A ghost town. Except for the haunting screams of my sisters echoing in my memories to fill the voids of quietness. They're more prominent at night. When the shadows can take on the forms of the one's from my past.

I shake my head, snapping myself out of my trance. No, I won't give myself time to think about that. If I do, the tears will start again and there's no telling when they'll stop. That will only make the rest of my day go by even slower.

I sigh and the smell of fresh paint fills my lungs as I rest my head against the back of my chair and look around my newly refurbished office. An office coated in a crisp layer of forest green to hide the stains of red from a bygone era.

I clear my throat, forcing myself to sit back up and look at the documents outlining new trade routes to the kingdoms further west. They're not gonna pass themselves.

*I can do this. Just one document at a time.*

My eyes scan over the papers line by line, but the more I try to force myself to read, the less my brain comprehends the words on the page until eventually they're just meaningless squiggles. With a frustrated sigh I set the papers back down and massage my temples.

*Dammit. Come on Malala focus.*

The back of my throat slowly begins to burn and even though I tried so hard to fight them off, the tears well up anyway. Burning my eyes.

*I can't be this useless. When will I get the hang of this?*

I sigh.

*Maybe I need to take a break.*

I resign to that thought and sit back in my chair, looking up from my desk to stare back out into the hall just in time to see a young woman whizz by the door in a bright orange dress. My brows knit together as I listen out for her footsteps, but her heels never make a sound against the marble floor. Come to think of it, her heels never made a sound to indicate anyone was coming down the hall to begin with. Was she barefoot? No one in this castle walks around barefoot. She also looked a lot like...

"Aidene?" I stand out of my chair and it scrapes against the floor into the bookshelves behind me just as Balenda appears at the door with a knock. I jump.

"I brought you some tea, Queen Malala." She says with a bow.

"Balenda? D-did you see someone in the halls just now? Wearing an orange dress?" She looks back over her shoulder scanning the hall, then at me.

"No I didn't Queen Malala. Should I have seen someone?" She looks back over her shoulder to make sure she hasn't missed anything and I give her a small smile, shaking my head.

"No...It's nothing." *Geez, I've been pushing myself too much. Now my nightmares are bleeding into my daily life.*

Balenda smiles as she walks into the office and sets a tray of tea and fruit on the desk. I lower back down into my seat and watch her fuss as she pours me a cup, making it just the way I like it with a bit of royal jelly.

After my crowning ceremony months ago, I was lost in trying to figure out what to do with myself and the role I was given. All my training in becoming queen was completely thrown out the window in my grief from losing my sisters. But Balenda has been my strength. I guess it helps that the Thinning of my brood wasn't Balenda's first Thinning. So she knew what to prepare herself for.

My eyes travel from her freshly washed green uniform to her hair neatly pulled back in a sleek bun. There're more streaks of silver through it than I remember.

“Thank you Balenda.” I smile, grabbing the delicate tea cup from its matching saucer and holding the aromatic liquid to my face. “And I told you, you can call me Lala like before.” She chuckles.

“Oh I know, but you’re a queen now, and I want to set an example for everyone else in the castle to treat you as such.” My heart warms and the tension in my body eases a little, but not enough to stop Balenda from eyeing me in concern.

“You look stressed, love.” I nod, swallowing a sip of tea.

“Yeah, these contracts and documents seem to keep piling up with no end in sight.” Balenda eyes my stack of paperwork and nods. Then she purses her lips in thought.

“How about I have a bath prepared for you? It’ll help you to relax and have a more restful night’s sleep to tackle all of this tomorrow.” *I have* been feeling achy and tense from sitting hours at my desk. Maybe a hot bath will do me some good.

“That would be nice. Thank you Balenda.” She smiles and bows.

“Of course my Queen. I’ll fetch Jewel and we’ll have it prepared for you right away.” She bows again and takes her leave to go draw the bath while I finish up my work for the day. Or at least the work I have the capacity to finish.

While in my grief, and with the quick execution of Queen Nasira, the duties of the land went untended to. Complaints, deed trades, business proposals, and new laws and legislatures, all went unanswered for months, and now I’m paying the price for it. I’m just now learning and getting the hang of these duties, and they only seem to be getting harder. But I can’t stop. I have to prove to the subjects...and The People, that I’m the right choice. That it wasn’t a mistake or a fluke that I survived. That I’m fit to run this queendom.

When Balenda comes back I’ve managed to work through a bit more work that will at least have me prepped for tomorrow.

“Your bath is ready, Your Majesty.” I nod and put all my papers away for the day. They’ve been sitting here for months, one more day won’t kill them. But if I continue staring at them like this, they just might kill *me*.

I follow Balenda out of the office and a few feet down the expansive second floor hall to the bedroom. I can smell the notes of

lavender and hear the rushing water coming from the bathroom before I even step foot into the queen's chambers.

It's still unnerving entering this room. It was once the bedroom Queen Mother slept in...and all the queen mothers before her. I was never allowed into this room unless called upon by Queen Nasira herself.

Which was never.

My body prickles as I walk across the threshold, and I have to remind myself to relax. This is *my* room now, and there won't be any consequences from laying foot in here.

The dark hardwood floor clacks against my heels as I follow Balenda into the bathroom where Jewel is finishing putting some lavender scented oil into my porcelain bath.

"The bath is all set for you Queen Malala," she smiles and bows. I nod back graciously as they help me to undress, unbuttoning the row of buttons trailing down my spine and releasing me from my day dress.

I try my best to not think about, or beat myself up over, all the work still piled on my desk, but that's easier said than done. Each night that I go to bed without finishing up the stack feels like the queendom will collapse at any moment from my lack of action. I'm always flabbergasted to find everything and everyone still intact the next day when I return to my desk.

I step into the warm soapy water, sighing in relief as the lavender steam curls up around my face. The tension in my body practically melts as I sit and submerge further into the water.

"Call for us if you need us, Your Highness," Balenda says softly as her and Jewel both bow before exiting the bathroom to prepare my room for bed.

Life here at the castle has been... complicated. I get along well with my servants, although some of them had to go. Balail, Queen Nasira's head guard, was let go as soon as I became queen, and so were a few others who showed that they favored the color red more than the crown. But it still feels like my every move is being watched. I haven't heard from, or even seen, anyone involved with The People since the day Queen Nasira was laid to rest. They could be anywhere. They could be anyone.

I lay my back against the now warm porcelain and try to forget my troubles and let the bath work its magic, when a shiver runs down my spine and the hairs on my arms prickles. I shift in the tub uncomfortably as a whisper-like noise tickles my ear drums. It starts off low and I strain to hear if it's Balenda and Jewel talking in the other room. I try my best to control my breathing that's growing heavier by the second as the noise continues. It gradually increases until it's a symphony of voices picking at my brain. I can't catch any fully formed thought before it's chaotically drowned out by another and another.

*Ugh, when will this incessant chatter end? It's like my mind no longer knows how to be quiet.*

I shake my head in annoyance and frustration, then, taking a deep breath, I sink into the water. Almost immediately my mind begins to calm from the silence of the water and bubbles in my ears and I'm filled with relief. It's the only thing that can forcefully keep the whispers and thoughts at bay. If only I could walk around like this. With my head in a bubble of warm water. Unable to hear the judgements and whispers of others and my own thoughts. Then I would truly be in a state of peace.

Suddenly, something foreign and furry brushes up against my leg and my eyes pop open as I shoot straight out of the tub with a gasp, clearing my eyes of water and suds.

*What was that!?! Did Balenda or Jewel leave a sponge in the tub?*

I cautiously reach under the soapy surface and feel around until my hand brushes up against the strange, felt object. I poke at it first. When it doesn't move my fingers tentatively wrap around it, making sure it isn't anything alive...or that used to be alive, before pulling it out of the water to examine it.

A little handmade yarn doll dangles from my fingertips as water trickles off its little gray dress back into the tub.

*How did this get in here? Did Jewel or Balenda mistakenly drop it in?*

I stroke the black braided pigtails between my fingers.

*Maybe it was something one of them was working on and it dropped from their clothes.*

But the more I examine the doll, the more clear it is that it's tattered and old...and a little dirty. As if it was once buried and someone dug it back up.

How strange.

I set it on the side of the tub to let it drain and ponder the origins of the doll as I finish my bath.

"Balenda, Jewel!" I call once I'm done. Balenda was right. The bath has effectively made me feel more relaxed and sleepy. I could spend another hour in here.

Seconds later Balenda pops her head into the bathroom.

"Are you all finished, Your Majesty?" She unwraps a warm towel that smells of white tea, and swaddles me in it as I step out of the tub.

"Yes, thank you." Jewel follows in right behind her, rolling up her sleeves to drain the water. The tattered doll on the side of the tub catches her attention.

"Oh!" She says with a little wrinkle in her nose. "Would you like me to throw this away for you, Your Highness? I can have the seamstresses sew you a new one," she offers, looking at the doll slightly concerned.

"Or we can try to have that one repaired first, Your Majesty." Balenda adds hurriedly so as not to offend me.

"Oh... that won't be necessary. I'll take it." So it isn't any of my servants' doll. Then how did it get in the tub? Did they not see it before running the bath?

I grab the doll and tuck it under my arm. There's really no reason for me to keep it, but I feel oddly *drawn* to it. It feels familiar and I don't want to throw it away. I've seen dolls like this before somewhere.

It reminds me of someone.

After patting my skin dry, Balenda rubs soft body butter into my limbs and I make my way out into my room where my favorite sleep wear is laid out on the turned down bed. I slip into them and slide into bed exhausted, putting the half dried doll into the drawer of my nightstand for later. The smell of chamomile tea sitting on top draws me in and I nurse it as Jewel and Balenda finish cleaning the rest of my room and prepping it for tomorrow morning.

“If there isn’t anything else you need, Your Majesty we’ll be on our way for the night.”

“Thank you Jewel, thank you Balenda, I’m all set. Good night.”

“Goodnight, Your Highness.” They bow and make their leave.

I smile at them as the door slowly closes behind them, and once they’re gone, the room feels... colder. The light coming from my side dresser lamp casts a dim aura over the dark stained wooden floors and forest green furniture.

The skylight above my bed displays a starless night somehow making my room seem even bigger...and even more empty. But, I do feel warmer. Thanks to the bath and the tea.

I drain the rest of it and set my empty cup on my nightstand before sliding further under the covers and turning out the lamp. My eyes scan the quiet dark space, nervously anticipating the return of the voices, followed by the nightmares. But they don’t come, and it isn’t long before the tea takes effect, successfully fighting off my chaotic thoughts and making me drowsy enough to soundly drift off to sleep.

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*Clink clink*

My eyelids lazily open to slits in the dark.

*Tink, clink*

I grumble under the covers, trying to drift back off to sleep.

*Just ten more minutes. It’s not even light outside yet.*

*Thump!*

The shifting in my room finally dawns on me and my eyes pop open in alarm.

*Someone’s here!*

I angle my head over my comforter to peer down the foot of the bed. My eyes quickly adjust to the darkness and I freeze as a figure standing in front of one of my dressers on the other side of the room shuffles through my drawers.

*That’s not Balenda... or Jewel...*

My muscles bunch under the covers as fear, then anger, bubbles through me.

*How did they get past the guards?*

Balenda and I did a deep purging of the guards as soon as I was crowned. Many people who were loyal to Queen Mother during her reign, or who were questionable in their loyalty, were immediately removed. My guard regime isn't one hundred percent complete yet, I admit. I decided it was best to build up my troops slowly with guards I can trust, and who've been heavily reviewed, rather than fill them to have bodies on post and suffer the consequences later. I have to make the foundation of my reign as sturdy as possible. But for them to be so incompetent to let someone slip into my room?!

I watch the figure shuffle through more of my belongings. I'm sure I can take them, it's been a while since I've sparred with anyone, but my years of training haven't forsaken me yet. But as my eyes adjust further, something peculiar about the figure makes me lay there and watch instead. They have the silhouette of a young woman. But the strange thing about her that's giving me pause, is that she's around my height! Extremely tall, like a dwarf queen! And her entire body looks like it's glowing a soft muted purple.

Pretty, long locs cascade down the woman's back as she continues to shuffle through the drawers as if she were familiar with this room, muttering something under her breath.

"Hello?" I say in my best intimidating voice. It doesn't phase her. The woman stops shuffling, finding what she came for, and turns towards the door while bunching her mauve dress in one hand and clutching a thick book in the other.

"Wait! I command you to stop!" I throw the covers off and hop out of bed. The cool floor sends a jolt through the bottoms of my feet, waking me even more from any lingering sleepiness. I pad after the woman as she slips through my bedroom door. "Who are you?!" I burst out into the hall looking around for the woman, but she's nowhere to be seen.

I spot my nightly guards posted at both ends of the hall, looking unphased. I head towards the one on my right, standing next to the study I use to learn in with my sisters. He's a middle aged man in his early fifties, one of the men Balenda and I handpicked to be a

part of my regime after I dismantled the old guards. His dark brown eyes look watchfully past bushy salt and pepper brows. It wasn't a hard choice replacing Balail with him and making him the head of my guards. His loyalty and duty to the crown is unmatched.

"Captain Marquis!" He straightens even further at the sight of me, bowing deeply.

"Your Highness, how may I be of assistance."

"Did you see a woman run out of my room just now? Long locs, wearing a long purplish dress?" He looks at me quizzically.

"Of course not, Your Highness. Rue and I have been posted here since you went to bed." I look over my shoulder towards Rue. The other guard posted at the other end of the hall. "...And we don't rotate for another hour. I assure you, no one has entered or left these halls, nor has anyone been in or out of your bedchambers besides you, Your Majesty." *That's not possible. Am I seeing things? Or could I have made a mistake with these guards?*

I look back at Marquis, searching his eyes for a lie. How could she have escaped so quickly without either of them seeing her? But then again, Balenda said she didn't see anyone in the halls yesterday outside my office when I swore I saw someone walk by. And I trust her more than anyone. She'd never lie to me. Right?

"Are you alright, Your Highness?" I jump, startled out of my thoughts. "Should I fetch one of your servants, Balenda or Jewel?" I open my mouth to refuse him, not wanting to awaken either of the women who do so much already, but as the adrenaline leaves my body and the fatigue sets back in, I can already tell that I won't be able to get back to sleep without some of Balenda's special teas to help me through the rest of the night. I nod, slightly embarrassed.

"Yes, please fetch Balenda."

"Of course, Your Highness." I head back to my room as he walks towards the servants quarters across the hall to get Balenda.

They both deserve bigger quarters honestly, but I want to keep them close since they're my most trusted servants. After we started rooting people out, I began to see how important it is to have people in my corner. I can't do everything myself, even though Queen Nasira made it seem like *she* did.

I slump back on my bed and look around my room. It looks undisturbed, despite the woman who was in here shuffling through my things.

My stomach churns.

*Am I imagining them because of the nightmares I've been having of Queen Mother and my sisters?*

*The nightmare of our Thinning.*

I shudder, willing the images of that night away from my mind with some deep breaths.

*That's over. I'm not there anymore. I'm safe.*

*I'm safe.*

It isn't long before Balenda enters through my bedroom door with a steaming cup of tea without me even needing to ask. I smile as I take it. Lord knows I've had many restless nights where I needed the help of a sleep aid just to function.

Balenda sits with me on my bed as I drink, stroking my hair and back. My eyes water as I absorb her presence. Her actions take me back to my childhood. When I would sit with her on the bed while she did my hair.

I blink away the memory. I'm not a little girl anymore and I hate feeling weak and defenseless, but this is one of the rare occasions where I don't have to be "Your Majesty". Under the cover of night, she's just Balenda, the woman who mothered me growing up, and I'm just her little Lala.

I don't have to say anything as she sits with me and waits patiently in silence until the tea takes effect before leaving me to sleep the rest of the night off.

# TWO

Sun beams peek through the skylight and warm my eyelids. The tinkling sounds of Jewel setting a breakfast platter on my nightstand, and Balenda pulling garments out of my closet and dressers for the day stirs me awake.

I stretch through the grogginess, my stiff joints popping as I wake myself even more. At least there were no nightmares.

“Good Morning,” I grumble to the two women.

“Good morning Queen Malala,” they beam, then turn back to their duties. I hate the mornings.

I sit up in bed and reach for my breakfast. Munching on the bowl of warm oats with a few spoonfuls of royal jelly and berries on top to sweeten it and finished it off with a tall green smoothie laced with royal jelly. It fills my belly and gives me the energy I need to get out of bed and head to the training room for my morning workout.

During my grieving I didn't have much of a routine. My training and habits fell to the wayside, and getting back in shape has been a bit of an uphill battle. Plus it's not the same as it was training with my sisters.

Once I'm done with my workout I head back to my room to refresh and dress, then head to my office to continue my work from yesterday. Now that I've had some time away from all the documents I can look at them with fresh and renewed eyes.

I spend a few hours slowly but surely making my way through the piles, sorting through requests and proposals and writing up responses. I want this stack to at least be halfway complete. The reports aren't going to stop coming in, and if I don't catch up I'm going to be buried alive.

As the sun reaches its peak, a knock sounds at my door, which feels like a welcome relief for my neck. I look up from my papers to Balenda standing by the entrance with her hands full of envelopes.

“This came in the mail for you today, Your Majesty.” She walks towards my desk and sets a couple letters, along with a sturdy blush envelope with a golden seal, in front of me. The wax seal has the shape of a crow embedded in it, the symbol of the house of Darya. A noble and wealthy family that lives on the east side of Hivena. Queen Mother would make deals with them and vouch for their support when she reigned. From what I remember, they have a lot of influence and connections with people involved with trade and construction. They’re definitely a family I should get to know better if I want my reign as queen to continue to gain more support and run smoothly.

“Thank you Balenda.” I pick up the letter and open it as she stands off to the side, curious. I pull out the thick parchment and let it unfold in my hands. A slight scent of jasmine drifts from the page scrawled in elegant letters.

*Dear Queen Majesty,*

*Congratulations on your coronation ceremony. We would like to formally invite you to this year's ball at the Darya Estate. This year's theme is A Night in the Tropical Rainforest in honor of your crowning. Refreshments and wine will be served along with great music and many nobles to commune with and keep your company. We would love if you would accept this invitation and join us in this year's celebration.*

*Our Humble regards,  
Sylvia Darya, The Lady of the House of  
Darya*

*And the Darya Family*

I look up from the letter to an excitedly smiling Balenda. I give her a small amused smile back.

“You know the fact that the House of Darya invited me to their ball doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re in support of me as a queen.”

“Yes, but it gives you an opportunity to change that.” She clasps her hands enthusiastically. I nod in agreement. That’s true. If I didn’t receive an invitation *at all* I would have clearly known where we stood. It’s only been a few months since I’ve been crowned as queen and I’ve been non stop busy at work making all the necessary transitions from Queen Nasira’s reign to mine. But this will be my first time out of the castle and getting my first taste of actually enjoying the spoils of being queen while strengthening my alliances. This could be good for all of us.

I clear my throat.

“Well then, if I can have you be in charge of communicating with the seamstresses for that evening as well as handle my transportation Balenda I would be grateful.” She nods her head and smiles brightly.

“Of course, Your Majesty. And I’ll attend with you personally as your lady in waiting.” Warmth floods my chest at her look of pride. After the Thinning I thought our relationship would be severed. I thought she’d never be able to see me the same way again, but she’s been my rock throughout this whole process, and I couldn’t be more grateful to have her.

“Good. Now let me get back to work.”

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I look down the length of dining table, sitting right in the spot Queen Mother used to sit. The gentle night air blows against my back and neck from the open balcony doors behind me. Except for the night sounds, it’s so quiet. I wonder if this is how Queen Mother felt after she was crowned queen and found herself alone in this giant castle. She was probably happy to finally have some peace and quiet. Queen Nasira wasn’t much of a people person.

I pick at my dinner and sip on my royal jelly wine, Queen Nasira always had an ample supply of it in production when she was alive. It’s the only legacy of hers I don’t mind keeping around. And

for good reason. After the amount of work I've done today I could use a horse tranquilizer to relax.

I take another sip when a rusty squeak from the corner of the room catches my attention. I pause and slowly gaze over the wide lip of my glass to spot a little wooden horse on wheels in the middle of the entryway to one of the halls. Staring at me.

"Hello?" I crane my neck to see if anyone is hiding around the corner, possibly playing a trick. But no one replies. My eyes flick back down to the children's toy. Its colorful mane made of yarn looks oddly familiar. I try to remember where I've seen it from when an abrupt shiver runs down my back and the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. I set down my glass and grip the table as my surroundings go blurry and a wave of dizziness overcomes me.

*What's going on?*

The candles and lights flicker as whispers fill my ears and whip past my face on an unseen wind.

*"The People..."*

*"...destroy them..."*

*"...great danger..."*

*"...devour us!"*

*"Run!"*

My heart beats wildly in my chest as my eyes dart about the room for help. I feel like I'm in the center of a tornado and I'm about to be thrown off my feet into an abyss.

*"...kill us all..."*

The wooden table chips under my clawing nails as I try to steady my labored breathing and not puke my dinner backup onto my plate.

*What is this? Another panic attack?*

"Are you okay, Your Majesty?!" I jump, startled by the clear voice right next to me and turn to see one of my servants staring at me worried. The voices slowly ebb away and the room slowly ceases its spinning.

"Yes...yes I'm fine." I clear my throat, blinking back tears. She nods hesitantly.

"Would you like me to take these for you, Your Majesty?" She points and I nod as she takes away the finished platters. I nervously

watch her leave, unsure if I want to be left alone again. Once she's out of sight I turn back to the other entrance, only to find the wooden horse... gone.

*Where'd it go?*

I look down at my wine and push it away. Putting my hand to my head.

*What was that about?*

Taking some sips from my water glass to ease my nerves, I push away from the table and head out of the dining room. I don't have time for these episodes. Nor do I have time for anyone's games. I have to meet my seamstresses in the fitting room. The Darya ball isn't too far away and it's going to be the first impression many nobles will have of me as the new queen since my coronation. It needs to be powerful and impactful. I have to show them that I'm not afraid, I *am* their new queen, and I'm ready to take on anything.