



The Almost Queen

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The fantasy novel *The Almost Queen* begins in the aftermath of eight years of war, when Aulen is soaked in blood. Terran comes to its throne having lost his entire family in the war. He most wants to forge peace, both between the remaining factions, and between the humans and witches banished to Outerland.

Ellara is a light witch. She fought in the war to ensure the freedom of the witches, backing whichever self-declared kings promised to release them from their banishment. Taller than humans, and possessing powerful abilities and green skin, witches are feared and loathed by humans; for now, their exile protects them from genocide.

When Ellara is captured and learns Terran is Aulen's new king, she requests an audience with him, presenting the token he gave her a decade earlier when she saved his life at school. She offers him a deal: her freedom, and the freedom of her people, in exchange for her service as his sorceress and an alliance with the witches.

Terran, under pressure to marry and produce an heir, counters with an offer of marriage. Though Ellara swears she can never love him, and Terran is certain he can never fully trust her, they agree to a marriage of convenience. But not everyone in Aulen wants peace. The couple learns how to lower their defenses against one another, working to fight on a united front.

This battle-scarred world is built in perfect balance, with enough details to ensnare attention while skirting exposition. While Ellara and Terran's relationship develops quickly, their stories are shared in a more deliberate manner, within their alternating perspectives. In some ways, they warm to one another more easily than they are able to make peace with themselves.

With a focus on embracing scars and maintaining hope within heartache, *The Almost Queen* is an intimate fantasy romance.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (September / October 2021)

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