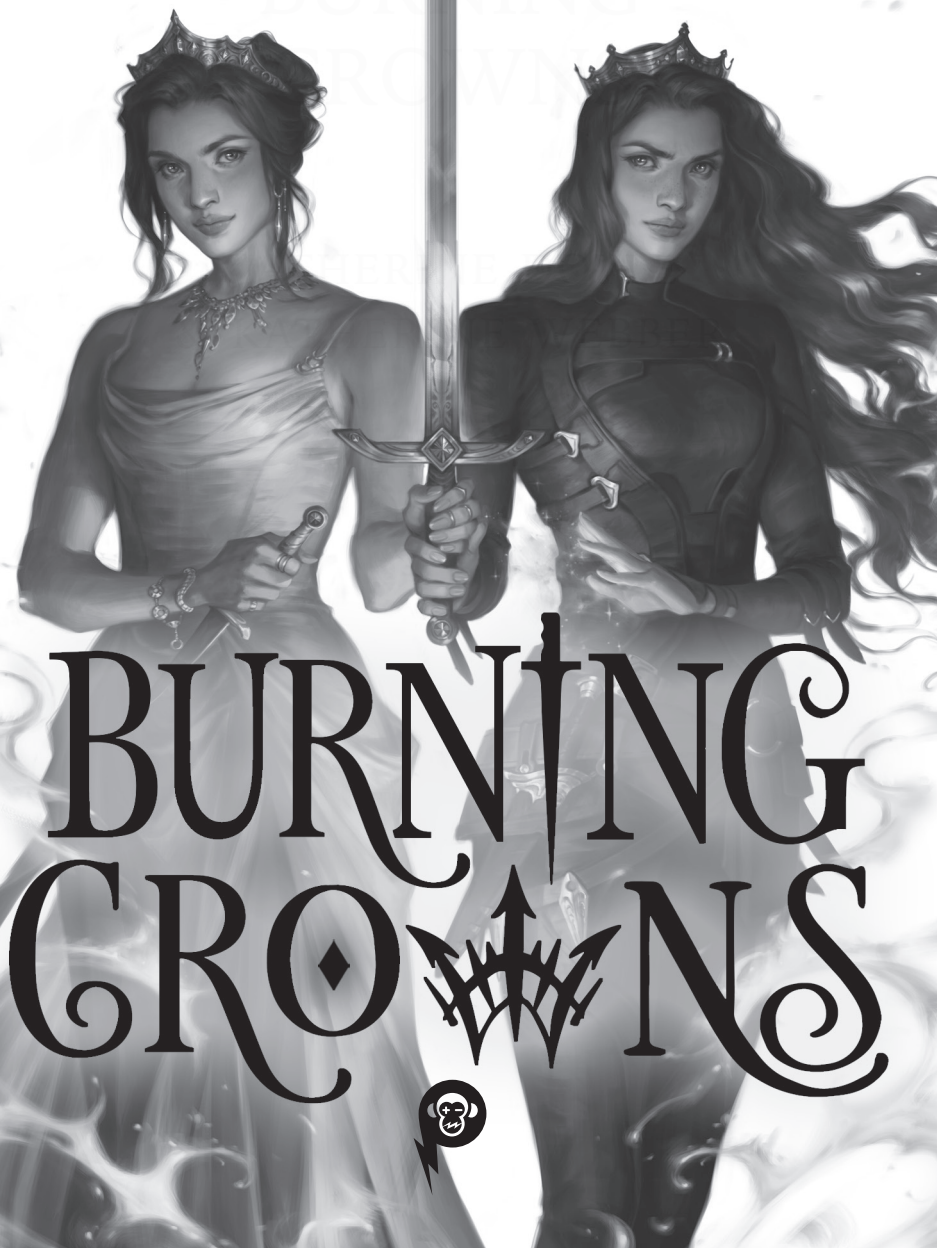


CATHERINE
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&

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BURNING
CROWNS
SERIES



BURNING CROWNS





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*For Grace Doyle, Louisa Tsang and Virginia Webber
– a trio of wonderful mothers*



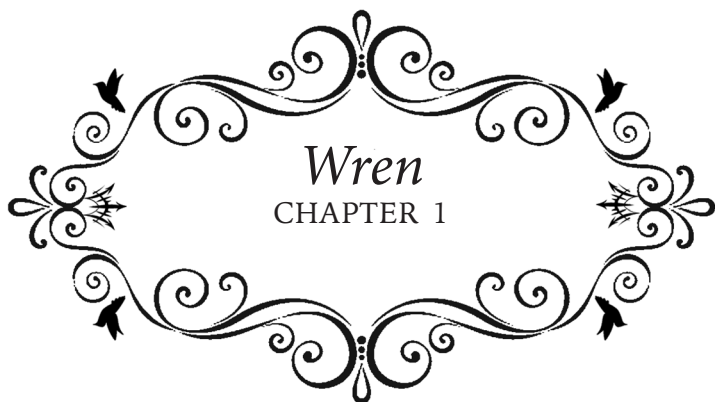






*Beware the curse at last set free,
Death lurks beneath a burning tree . . .*





Wren
CHAPTER 1

Wren Greenrock stood at her bedroom window in the west tower of Anadawn Palace, watching the moon rise above the distant trees. The sky was inky blue and pinpricked with a scattering of stars. It was a peaceful night and yet Wren felt strangely disquieted, as though the kingdom of Eana was not at rest, but rather only holding its breath.

‘When you’re done gazing wistfully at the moon, I could use a little help over here!’ Rose’s voice cut through the stillness from across the room, where she was riffling in her wardrobe. ‘Truly, I’ve never seen such disarray.’

Their royal tour had come to an end only hours ago, and Wren had arrived back at the palace to find that her bedroom renovations had at last been completed. Now she finally had a place that was all her own

Of course Rose had insisted on inspecting it at once.

The stone walls were hung with colourful tapestries, depicting the witch queens and kings of old, and the floor had been covered with a sprawling rug. A grand oak-wood bed with a gauzy canopy occupied the centre of the room, while a looming wardrobe spanned the entire wall nearest the door. There was an ornate dresser by the adjacent bathing chamber, the drawers of which were already filled

with various pots of cream and colourful eyeshadows, all manner of blushes and brushes, and enough jewellery to sink a small ship.

Wren had been looking forward to an early night in her new bedroom, but, energized from the success of their first royal tour, Rose was too restless to retire. So, she had taken on another project at once – the complete reorganization of Wren’s palace wardrobe. Every so often, a rogue pair of trousers or a scuffed boot would soar through the air.

‘Why don’t we do this tomorrow?’ Wren suggested for the third time. ‘Or maybe never?’

‘No, no, no,’ muttered Rose, wrinkling her nose at a muddy gown. ‘Trust me, you’ll be glad when it’s done. Wren, truly, *how* have you managed to get mud on everything already? You haven’t even worn this dress yet!’

Wren recalled with fleeting fondness the evening on tour when, in a fit of boredom, she had hidden inside her travelling trunk to jump out and scare Rose, her sister shrieking so loudly the guards had come running. Perhaps she should have taken off her travelling boots first and saved all those beautiful, unworn dresses. But she didn’t mind mud or sand, or mess. Sometimes, amid the royal grandeur of the palace, she found herself missing the untamed beaches of Ortha, the tang of brine floating on the breeze, the satisfying squelch of mulch in the surrounding forest and the scratch of tree bark against her fingers as she climbed the trees up and up and up, until the canopies broke and she could see all the way to the horizon.

Rose sighed as she surveyed another stained dress, then shot her sister a pointed look.

For a passing moment, Wren considered crawling out of the window, clambering down the tower and escaping to

the desert, but her feet were aching, and it wouldn't be worth the ire she would face upon her return. So, instead, she pouted at the moon like a sulking child.

A rogue wind whipped up, casting a chill in the air. As she reached out to close the window she caught sight of her reflection in the glass. She winced, hating the paleness of her face, the hollows in her cheeks, the new silver streak in her hair. It was a sign of her grief at losing Banba, and a stark reminder that the world she had grown up in, sheltered and guided by her steadfast grandmother, was no longer the one in which she lived. It was a reminder of the crack in her heart.

And yet the world around Wren had already moved on. Over two moons had passed since the Battle of Anadawn, where the twins had fought the rebels who'd sought to overthrow them. Wren had broken the ancient curse that had once split their five strands of magic – tempest, enchantment, warrior, healing and seeing. This had allowed all the witches of Eana to have control over each strand, as they once did before those powers were taken from them, splintered by their evil ancestor Oonagh Starcrest during a fight against her benevolent twin sister Ortha over a thousand years ago. Together, Wren and Rose had defended their throne. After, they had chosen to show mercy towards those who had risen up in fear of them and their fellow witches, so they could remake the kingdom as a peaceful nation.

It was going well, so far. But deep down, Wren did not feel peaceful.

'This is entirely useless,' Rose announced. She was on her feet now, glaring at Wren's wardrobe as though it had personally offended her. 'First order of new business: now that we're back, you need your own seamstress.'

‘Fine by me,’ said Wren, slamming the window shut.

‘Fortunately, I know just the one,’ Rose went on. ‘Do you know, she made the very gown I’m wearing?’ She twirled to show it off. Even now, after an exhausting tour, Rose looked just like a princess should, in a pink corseted gown inlaid with golden brocade. Her hair hung in perfect chestnut curls that were pulled away from her face by a rose pin, still in bloom. Her green eyes were as bright as emeralds, her cheeks rosy from her efforts at organizing Wren’s clothes.

Wren tucked her silver streak behind her ear, and looked down at her own crumpled blue dress, wishing she looked as put together as her twin. Wishing she felt the same sense of peace and confidence about the future. ‘I don’t know what I’d do without you.’

‘Luckily we won’t ever find out.’ Rose kicked a rogue boot aside as she came towards Wren. ‘And anyway, this is what sisters are for. We take care of each other.’ She threw her arms around Wren, the warmth of her embrace chasing Wren’s coldness away. When she pulled back, Rose studied Wren’s face and pursed her lips. ‘Oh, Wren, you look absolutely exhausted. You really should get some rest. You need it. Now that we’re back, there is a lot to do.’

‘Can’t wait,’ said Wren, trying to summon a smidgeon of enthusiasm.

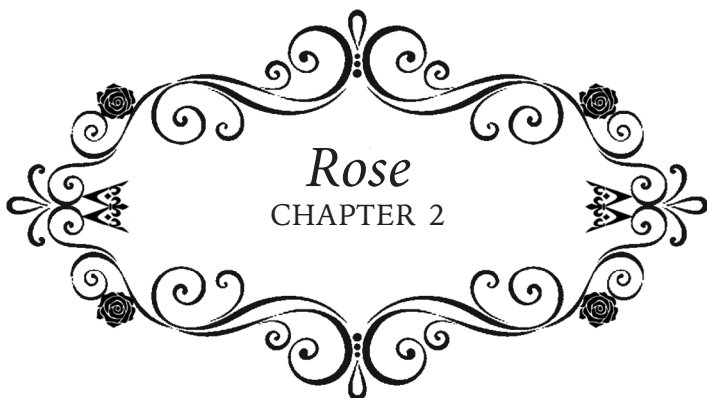
Rose laughed at her attempt. ‘Sleep well, Wren. Tomorrow, the real work of ruling Eana begins!’ Then she skipped out of the room, humming as she went. When the door closed behind Rose and the room fell silent once more, Wren collapsed on to her bed, where a familiar fur-lined dress lay crumpled in a heap. Rose must have chucked it across the room during her excavation.

Wren pressed her face into the gown, inhaling the scent of wild pine and fresh snow. Her thoughts flitted, as they often did, to Gevra. To King Alarik. To Tor and Elske. And then, like milk curdling, her mind turned to Oonagh, who, after a thousand years, had broken free of her icy tomb on the northern continent and was now hiding somewhere in its wilderness.

Wren's time in Gevra had changed her, though she was careful not to show it around Rose. But now that she was finally alone, she could no longer ignore the faint stinging in her wrist. She rolled her sleeve back, revealing the jagged silver scar that had appeared not long after the Battle of Anadawn. She traced it with her thumb, setting loose a plume of nausea inside her.

She lay back and closed her eyes, willing sleep to find her so she could forget the terrible blood spell she and Alarik had performed in Gevra. So she could forget the ancient witch queen she had accidentally awoken and the strange scar that was part of her now.

After a while, the nausea subsided but a deep feeling of unease remained.



Rose
CHAPTER 2

Rose Valhart smiled as she strolled through the Anadawn orchards. This morning, she wore a pale pink day dress the colour of spring blossoms that swished around her ankles, and her hair was pulled back in a simple braid. The sound of children's laughter echoed through the trees, and Rose spotted a glimpse of Tilda, a spirited young witch from Ortha, leading a group of other young witches deeper into the orchard. They were giggling and shouting as they pulled plums off the trees, and the sound of their merriment was so joyful Rose couldn't bring herself to tell them that they were wasting perfectly good fruit.

It was good to be home. Even better than that, it was good to be home as queen. To know that she and Wren were making steps towards building the kind of country their people deserved. One that was prosperous and bountiful, and welcoming to all. One that was safe.

Rose stumbled on a tree root, her smile slipping. The morning breeze was cooler than she was expecting, and as she rubbed the chill from her arms, she regretted not bringing her shawl with her. The coldness in the air turned her thoughts. She had not forgotten the shared vision she and Wren had seen several weeks ago – that terrifying