

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

Chapter 1-5

GIDEON TUGGED AT THE jacket of his stolen uniform. The forest green fabric was stiff, as if it hadn't been broken in.

The poor guard he'd taken it from was currently unconscious and tied up in a supply closet on the third floor of Larkmont Palace. Four other guards hadn't been so lucky. Their bodies were floating in the frigid waters of the fjord.

He'd had no choice.

Gideon was deep in enemy territory. If discovered, he'd be better off dead.

His thoughts were a dark contrast to the bright ballroom he stood in. Musical instruments hummed as they warmed up, preparing for the private recital that was about to start. Chandeliers winked overhead as servants wove between the glittering guests in Prince Soren's ballroom, offering one last round of refreshments before the music started.

As Gideon stood along the wall, watching the room like the other guards, his gaze fixed on his mark: the beautiful girl in the golden dress.

Rune Winters.

Prince Soren stood beside her, his palm pressed to the small of Rune's back. The Umbrian prince wore a tailored suit, his family's silver crest stitched into the cape slung stylishly over one shoulder, and his hungry gaze roamed down the dress Rune wore, inviting his rich friends to do the same.

Gideon's blood burned as he watched them.

It was a beautiful gown—he couldn't deny it. Made by some fancy designer, it likely cost a small fortune. But it wasn't *Rune*. Gold didn't suit her, and the cut was severe. The plunging V neckline ended a few inches above her belly button in front and at the base of her spine in back, sending a powerful message:

Look at her. She's mine.

The prince wanted his guests to admire the beautiful witch on his arm. To Soren, Rune was an exotic creature. A living artifact he was determined to add to his collection.

If Harrow's intel was correct, one week ago, the prince had asked her to marry him. And Rune had accepted, on one condition: if Soren wanted her for a wife, he had to give Cressida an army.

It's why Gideon volunteered for this job.

With an army, Cressida would wage war against the New Republic. If she won, she would reinstate the Reign of Witches and more people would die.

Gideon couldn't let that happen. So long as Rune was the lynchpin in this unholy alliance between Cressida and Soren, he couldn't let her live.

Gideon had kill orders and he was going to see them through. Right here. Tonight.

He'd waited all evening for his chance. Standing against the wall of the ballroom, sweating in this stolen uniform, he watched Rune flirting with her betrothed. Watched Soren flirt back: touching her with hungry hands, devouring her with haughty eyes.

It was driving him to the brink.

Alex was barely in the ground, and Rune was already engaged to another man. A prince, no less.

Is that what she wanted all along—a prince?

He was a fool to think he'd ever had a chance.

Gideon fingered the gun holstered at his hip. He was ready. More than ready. All he needed was the right moment ...

"Do you miss your home?"

Gideon scanned the circle of party guests surrounding Rune and Soren until his gaze landed on the speaker: a young woman with wheat-gold hair braided into a crown.

Rune laughed. "Can you miss a place where everyone wants you dead?"

Gideon watched her press her champagne glass to her red lips, then tip the last swallow into her mouth.

It was her third drink tonight.

Not that Gideon was counting.

"What was it like before the revolution?"

"We witches once lived as you do," Rune said, motioning to the grand hall they stood in, where chandeliers twinkled and marble columns propped up the painted ceiling. "Our lives were full of music, beauty, art..."

Yes, thought Gideon. *And your luxuries came at the expense of our misery.*

The buzz and hum of fiddles grew louder. Gideon glanced across the room, where guests began to fill chairs facing the musicians.

“That way of life was stolen from us the night Gideon Sharpe led a group of revolutionaries into the palace.”

At the sound of his name on her lips, his attention shot back to her.

“He murdered two queens in their beds while his comrades cut the rest of us down in the streets. He would have let them murder me, too, if Cressida hadn’t saved me.”

Gideon bristled. *You’re leaving out a lot of the story, sweetheart.*

“It must be heartbreaking,” said the prince as his knuckles grazed the bumps of Rune’s spine in a slow path downward. “To be so far away, knowing the horrible things taking place there ... I’m glad you’re free of it.”

Soren’s arms slid around her waist, in what might have been an effort to comfort her, but felt more like a reminder: Rune was *his*.

Gideon rolled his shoulders, forcing himself to relax.

“Witches are still being slaughtered for nothing more than the crime of being what they are,” said Rune, studying her empty glass from within Soren’s arms. “I’ll never be free until every last one of my sisters is free, too.”

The hum of instruments fell silent and an announcement sounded: the recital was starting.

One by one, the circle of guests dispersed, moving toward the musicians.

Twining his fingers through Rune’s, Soren tugged her toward their seats. They’d barely walked two steps when the first song started, and Rune’s footsteps faltered.

Gideon watched her jerk to a stop.

“Everything all right?” asked the prince, turning back to her.

As the music rose, Gideon glanced to the musicians. The song was familiar. But why he recognized it, he didn’t know.

“I-I need to powder my nose.” Rune seemed to be struggling to compose herself. “I’ll be right back...”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Soren. “The concert has begun.” He lowered his voice. “This recital is for *you*, Rune. To celebrate our engagement. You need to be here.”

His fingers white-knuckled around hers.

Gideon’s eyes narrowed. His body tightened like a coiled spring as he watched Soren drag her onward. Closer to the music. The very thing she was trying to get away from.

“I need...” Rune tried to tug her hand out of his. When Soren appeared to grip harder, refusing to release her, Gideon stepped out of position along the wall. The guards stationed ten paces down glanced his way, reminding Gideon that he was surrounded by enemies. He couldn’t draw attention to himself.

Also: Rune didn’t need to be rescued. This was made clear as she stepped directly in front of Soren, blocking his path to the chairs.

“I promise not to miss much.” Pushing herself onto her toes, she slid her pale arms around the prince’s neck and grazed his cheek with her lips, lingering there. When Soren’s free hand settled on her hip, admiring its curve, she added: “Later tonight, when the recital is over and the guests are gone, I have something special planned for you.”

Gideon’s heart dropped at those words. As he watched Soren slide his hand up and run his fingers along Rune’s jaw, his entire body turned to stone.

“Something special?” the prince murmured, leaning down to press his mouth to Rune’s.

Slipping her hand into his brown hair, Rune kissed Soren back, giving him a taste of what was to come. Soren pulled her in closer, and Gideon knew this wasn’t the first time. There had been other kisses. Probably more than kisses.

The realization awoke something in him. Something tremulous and aching. It knotted around his rib cage, threatening to drag him to the bottom of the sea.

Enough.

He reached for his pistol.

But before he could finish this, Rune slipped out of Soren’s grasp.

“I think you’ll like my surprise.” Her cheeks were rosy as she walked backward. “See if you can guess what it is while I’m gone.”

Rune winked. The prince’s eyes darkened with lust.

Gideon was going to be sick.

Rune spun on her heel and strode away, leaving Soren and Gideon to stare after her, the dress putting her on full display.

She rushed past guests making their way toward their chairs and guards stationed along the walls. As she hurried to the door, she nearly ran straight into the servant coming through them, halting just before they collided. The young woman balanced a shaking tray of glasses in one hand and held a bottle of whiskey in the other.

Gideon watched Rune exchange a few words with the servant, take the bottle from her, and disappear into the hall.

There it is.

The moment he'd been waiting for.

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TWO

RUNE

DON'T CRY DON'T CRY don't cry.

Tears burned in Rune's eyes as she fled down the hall, past the stoic guards in their dark green uniforms. She was glad the rims of their hats shielded their faces, preventing her from seeing what they must think of her.

She couldn't let the tears spill. Not here. Not with them all watching.

But no matter how fast she ran, she couldn't outrun the song still playing in the ballroom, each note an arrow through her heart.

Alex's song.

The wistful tune had transported Rune back to Wintersea, to standing in her library's doorway, watching her best friend hunched over the keys of her grand piano, his hands casting a spell over the room.

Alexander Sharpe.

This song—the one chasing her away—was the last he'd ever written.

Rune touched his ring, still on her finger, as a wave of grief swelled inside her. She scrambled for something to protect herself against the terrible wave, that horrible *missing*, and came up empty-handed.

It was why she'd needed out of that ballroom. Before she broke down sobbing in the middle of a party to celebrate her upcoming marriage to a prince.

We would have been married by now.

She would have preferred Alex over Soren. Alex was her best friend. Other than her grandmother, he was the only person in the world who'd ever truly loved her. She might not have been *in love* with him, but given enough time, perhaps she could have been.

But Alex wasn't the only thing she missed.

If Rune was being honest, she missed her home.

Home.

The word seared her.

Back in the ballroom, Soren's friend had asked if she missed the New Republic, and Rune had laughed the question off.

But the truth?

The truth was Rune missed the sight of Nan's gardens, sparkling with dew. She missed riding Lady through the wildest parts of Wintersea. She missed the smell of the sea and the woods and the fields. She missed the winds and storms.

She liked Umbria and its capital, Caelis. She liked the architecture and the art, the culture and fashions and food, the absence of anti-witch sentiment. She liked it for a visit or a holiday. But it wasn't where she belonged.

Rune hadn't realized she'd feel this way when she agreed to marry Alex and leave the New Republic. She didn't know that in leaving the island behind, she was leaving her heart with it.

Could you miss the place where everyone wanted you dead?

Rune squeezed the whiskey bottle's neck. *Apparently yes.*

If there weren't a dozen guards watching her flee, Rune would have guzzled whiskey straight from the bottle. The three glasses of champagne had numbed her a little, warming her insides and blurring the edges of her vision. It was how she got through most evenings now: in a fog of intoxication.

But if she were going to get through *this* evening, she'd need more than three glasses of alcohol. She'd need an entire bathtub full.

As Alex's song built, growing louder, as its melancholic sound sank into her bones, Rune hiked up her dress and ran, glancing back over her shoulder to make sure Soren wasn't following.

Soren. Her fiancé.

Rune shivered, her skin still numb in all the places he'd touched her.

Later tonight, when the recital is over and the guests are gone, I have something special planned for you.

A cold sweat broke out over her skin.

Why did I say that?

Rune had nothing planned. She'd simply needed to flee.

The thought of going to him later, *alone*, made her gut twist. She would rather walk into the sea, her pockets full of heavy stones.

Make him want you.

It was the directive Cressida had given Rune when they first came to Umbria: to make herself irresistible to Soren Nord, an Umbrian prince.

It was what Rune was good at, after all.

Enticing men.

Soren possessed a fleet of warships. As a former admiral in the navy, he was well traveled and had a penchant for collecting beautiful, exotic things. Best of all, though: he was sympathetic to witches and rumored to be on the hunt for a wife.

So after the opera one night, while Cressida watched from the wings, Rune waited for the prince to exit his box and planted herself directly in his path. He'd walked straight into her, spilling wine down the front of her very expensive dress.

The prince was horrified at his clumsiness. And Rune was so gracious and forgiving. To make it up to her, he invited her to the ballet the next night. And the theater two nights after that. Suddenly, they were spending every day together. Going on strolls or carriage rides. Dining alone.

He was smitten, and Rune stoked his affection, playing her part perfectly, until she had what Cressida wanted: a proposal.

But to Soren's surprise, Rune turned him down.

I can't marry you, she told him, reciting her lines. *Not until every last witch is safe.*

More specifically: she *wouldn't* marry him—not unless he gave Cressida an army to wage war on the New Republic.

Rune had no desire to marry Soren, nor was she interested in doing the witch queen's bidding. The very idea of working for Cressida filled Rune with dizzying self-loathing.

But Cressida had saved her life, along with Seraphine's. Cressida didn't want her dead, unlike Gideon and everyone else in the New Republic. Most importantly: Cressida wanted to save the witches they'd left behind. Girls who were being exterminated at this very moment.

Every week, the names of dead witches made their way to Rune's ears. The Blood Guard had captured Aurelia Kantor, a powerful sibyl—a witch who could see into the past, present, and future. And now they were using her to give them the locations of every witch in hiding. It allowed them to hunt down and execute witches with merciless precision. Sometimes as many as three or four a week.

Ancients knew what they were doing to Aurelia to get that information.

Once, the Crimson Moth would have rescued her. But the Moth was here in Larkmont Palace, all the way across the Barrow Strait, half-drunk on champagne.

Look at yourself, Rune thought. Partying with princes while your sisters are murdered.

She'd abandoned those girls. And if Gideon Sharpe wasn't stopped, there would be no witches left in the New Republic.

If Rune were still on the island, she would have already broken Aurelia out of custody and smuggled her to the Continent, protecting other witches in the process. But the only way in was by sea, and every port of entry teemed with witch hunters and their witch-hunting hounds—dogs trained to scent magic. They were even stationed aboard ships traveling to and from the island.

Only one ship—the *Arcadia*—refused to allow the Blood Guard and their beasts to board their vessels. But that just meant the witch hunters traveled undercover. And once the boat entered New Republic waters, it was boarded by hounds who sniffed out every witch before they could set foot on the island.

Even *if* Rune got the sibyl out somehow, the Blood Guard would never stop hunting her kind. The New Republic's spies were searching the continent for Cressida Roseblood and her growing court, and if they had a sibyl in their hands, it was only a matter of time before they found where they were hiding.

They will never stop hunting us.

The only way to keep witches safe was to destroy the Blood Guard and tear down the New Republic.

And the only way to do *that* was to put Cressida back on her throne.

Rune wanted Cressida on a throne like she wanted a hole in her chest. The girl was vile. A cold-blooded murderess. But when compared to the alternative—a society that wanted to tie girls like Rune up by the ankles, slit their throats, and watch the blood drain from their bodies—Cressida Roseblood was the lesser of two evils.

Because under the rule of a witch queen, at least witches would be *safe*.

With Soren's backing, Cressida would ensure no witch was ever hunted again.

Cressida was in the capital, looking for more alliances to forge, but she was due back any day now. The moment she returned, she and Soren would sign the contract his lawyers had drafted, sealing their alliance.

And Rune would be required to marry him.

The powder room came into view. Rune fixed her gaze on the door. Once safely inside, she would let herself fall apart. Just for a minute. And when that minute was up ...

Rune thrust the door open and stepped inside, letting it swing shut behind her.

Candles lit the dark room, flickering in wall sconces and in candleholders lining the sink's ledge. As she strode to the sink, Rune uncorked the whiskey and took a long sip straight from the bottle. It burned her tongue and throat.

I thought I left all of this behind.

Rune had assumed it would be easy. After all, she was used to playing roles. Playing the part of “smitten fiancée” should have been a piece of cake.

But ever since Alex's death, the flirting and scheming and deceiving was taking a toll. Hence: her near breakdown in front of Soren's friends, and the bottle of whiskey gripped in her fist.

After fleeing the New Republic, Rune had foolishly thought she might finally get to be herself. No longer a silly, shallow socialite but a witch in plain sight. The *real* Rune Winters.

But who is that? she thought. *Who is the real Rune Winters?*

She shoved the question down.

It doesn't matter. Cressida needed an army, and Soren had one. It was up to Rune to secure that army. What mattered was who she *needed* to be: a girl who would put an end to the Blood Guard and finally ensure the safety of all witches.

You can do this. Remember what's at stake.

At the sink, she took another long sip of whiskey, shivering at the taste, and glanced into the mirror. Tears streaked her face. Her reddened eyes stared back at her, splotches of pink mottling her nose and cheeks.

Her gaze moved downward. The golden dress Soren had given her was not at all her taste. Gold was for accents only; it drew too much attention otherwise. And the cut was, well ... razor-sharp. It put her entire body on display.

She hated it.

It made her think of another dress. One that suited her like no other ever would. Because the giver knew what her soul required, not just her body.

Rune fought off that thought before its claws burrowed in.

She would *not* think of Gideon Sharpe. She was *done* thinking about him.

Except, apparently, she wasn't.

Like Alex, Gideon had also proposed to Rune. Not marriage, exactly, but a partnership. A future together.

She fisted her hands.

Gideon never really loved you. He loved the girl he thought you were. So it doesn't matter what he proposed.

Gideon could never love a witch.

She wasn't sure what was more upsetting: that Alex had loved her, or that Gideon didn't.

Rune had been so certain the Blood Guard captain would hunt her down—as he'd sworn to do. But two months had passed, and he hadn't come.

Maybe he decided I'm not worth his revenge.

Maybe he's moved on.

Rune clenched her fists.

Who cared what the reason was? He was gone. Out of her life.

Tears burned in her eyes, sharper than the whiskey. Rune took another swig, hoping it would numb her enough to go back to the ballroom. Surely Alex's song was over by now.

But her feet refused to turn around and walk her back.

Rune glanced at the ring on her finger and lowered the bottle.

He's gone. He's never coming back. You've had two months to grieve. It's time to move on.

Alex would understand why she had to do this. Why she needed to marry Soren. He wouldn't like it, but he would understand. He would forgive her.

It was the thought of Alex—kind, good, safe Alex—*forgiving* her that did Rune in.

Instead of rallying, the opposite happened. Something tried to claw its way out of her. She grabbed hold of the sink's ceramic sides, desperately needing to hold it back.

But she couldn't.

The grief erupted.

Rune gripped the sink and broke into silent, quaking sobs as the sadness wrapped around her like chains, pulling her down with its weight. She was so overwhelmed by it, she almost didn't hear the door open behind her.

Though her vision was blurred with tears, she saw forest green flash across the mirror.

Great. Soren has sent one of his guards to fetch me.

Could she not have five minutes alone?

Was this to be the rest of her life?

Palming the tears from her eyes, she reached for the smile she used as a weapon. The one that masked the emptiness inside. She was about to use it on this unsuspecting guard, when another glance into the mirror stopped her. Rune would know that cruel mouth anywhere.

Gideon pushed back his hat and aimed his gun straight at her.

As their gazes met, Rune's heart pounded like a hurricane.

I thought you'd forgotten me.

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THREE

GIDEON

AS HE RAISED HIS gun to kill, Gideon made his first mistake of the evening.

He looked at Rune before firing.

Those cold gray eyes bored into him. The same eyes that haunted him night after night. The eyes of a girl he wanted to forget.

Why is she crying?

Gideon squeezed the pistol in his hand.

It doesn't matter. I don't care.

But he couldn't unsee the tears streaming down her face. Couldn't *not* notice the whiskey bottle—significantly less full than when she'd grabbed it while fleeing the ballroom.

The sight of her threatened to crack something in him. It was a dangerous, destabilizing feeling. Gideon needed to steel himself against it.

“Some things never change, do they?”

Rune spoke calmly to the mirror, her gaze locked on him. Gideon resisted the urge to skim the lines of her golden dress.

Shoot her, damn it.

“Stalking a girl into the powder room with the intent to murder her is business as usual for you. Isn’t it, Gideon Sharpe?”

“Funny how you can’t keep my name out of your mouth tonight.”

Her gaze hardened to pewter. “What would your brother say if he saw you right now?”

Those words landed like a slap. He shrugged off the sting, forcing himself to remember that this witch was a master of deception. She’d deceived him into thinking she was an innocent girl. A girl who loved him. Meanwhile, she’d been secretly saving witches to build Cressida’s army. Not to mention, engaged to Alex.

Alex.

“My brother is dead because of you.”

She turned to face him, and Gideon couldn’t help himself. His gaze raked down the vicious V cut of her dress, now so close to him. Taking in far too much of her.

He swallowed down a sharp breath. “That dress looks ridiculous on you.”

Liar.

Rune rose to the bait, eyes flashing. “Soren would disagree, I think. He can’t keep his hands off me.”

A poisonous feeling swept through Gideon.

She lifted her chin and smirked.

Gideon remembered her fingers twined through the prince’s. How generous she’d been with her kisses. Staying close to him at all times. Letting him show her off to his friends.

She’d never done those things with Gideon.

It was a stern reminder of how out of his league she’d always been. How had Gideon ever let himself believe she’d settle for someone like him?

He’d been a sucker from the start.

“You’ve raised your expectations considerably,” he said. “Aiming for a prince.”

Her face hardened into a mask, but not one he was used to. All trace of the frivolous socialite she once pretended to be was gone. This mask was blank as a stone.

“On the contrary. These days, my only requirement for suitors is that they don’t want me dead. Most people would call those *low* expectations.”

“Whatever you say.” His shoulders straightened and he steadied his aim, needing to get this over with. “I’m just glad Alex isn’t here to witness how fast you’ve moved on.”

The words visibly struck Rune. Her hands clenched. “If Alex were here, I wouldn’t *have* to move on.”

“Until he discovered the truth: that you’re a conniving little—”

Rune flung the whiskey bottle straight at his head.

Gideon ducked. The wind of its passing ruffled his hair. The glass shattered against the wall behind him, and the spray of alcohol dampened his neck. A blur of gold shot past, and Gideon realized, almost too late, Rune was bolting for the exit.

He'd expected a spell, not a bottle flying at his face.

Gideon grabbed her around the waist and shoved her against the wall. He heard the air whoosh from her lungs. Before she could recover, he pinned her wrists over her head, then shoved his knee between her legs, trapping her there.

Rune gasped, glaring up at him.

Keeping her wrists pinned with one hand, he pressed the barrel of his gun to her temple.

Her smell invaded his senses, like juniper and sea salt. Threatening to weaken him. He swallowed, heart racing. It was dangerous being this close to her.

"I wish Alex never stepped in front of that bullet," she said. "It should be *you* who's dead. I wish it was you!"

The words were like a rusted knife in his gut.

How many times had he wished the same?

He remembered it all too well: Cressida demanding Gideon come with her, then lifting her gun and firing when he refused. Alex taking the bullet intended for him.

He could still hear Rune's scream. Still see her in his mind, covered in his brother's blood, clinging to Alex as he died.

And yet: if Rune had never helped Cressida Roseblood, Alex would be alive. It was Cressida who fired the gun, but Rune had helped conceal her. She'd been in league with Gideon's greatest enemy the whole time. Even now, Rune was trying to put Alex's murderer back on the throne.

This is why you're here.

He'd failed the Republic by falling in love with his mark. He'd suspected Rune was the Crimson Moth—a villainous witch he'd spent two years hunting—and he'd fallen for her anyway.

Rune had never loved Gideon. It had all been an elaborate farce. The entire time she'd pretended to court him, she was in love with his brother.

What had she said near the end?

Alex is twice the man you'll ever be.

Rune made Gideon believe that someone like her could love someone like him. And it was a lie. He was beneath her and always would be.

But Gideon hadn't wanted to see the truth.

He'd wanted Rune.

Because I'm weak.

By falling for her, Gideon had failed the Republic he'd helped build, the friends and soldiers he'd sworn to stand beside, the citizens he'd vowed to protect. Rune had weakened him, and that weakness had gotten people killed. It would continue to if left unchecked.

It's why Gideon was here. To carve out the weakness in his heart by eliminating the source: *her*. And into the hole left behind, he would pour molten steel. Until he was welded back together. Until he was stronger and colder than iron.

He dug the barrel of his gun into Rune's temple.

She didn't wince or look away. Just locked gazes with him. As if she'd been waiting for this moment. Waiting for *him*.

"Go ahead. Pull the trigger."

"I intend to."

"Yeah? *Prove it.*"

He'd forgotten the way her eyes raged when she was angry. Like a storm he wanted to walk straight into.

"We both know what you want to do to me, Gideon. Well, here's your chance."

His gaze slid to her mouth. "You have no idea, the things I want to do to you."

From this close, he noticed everything: the puffy redness of her eyes, the pink splotches on her face, the tears drying on her cheeks.

The alcohol on her breath.

Gideon knew Rune occasionally indulged, but this was something else.

He frowned. "You reek like an alehouse."

"Spoken like a true gentleman." Her voice was a husky growl.

"I've never been a gentleman." He leaned closer. "If you mistook me for one, that's on you."

It was impossible not to be aware of every inch of her. The heat of her thighs on either side of his knee. The fevered beat of her pulse beneath his palm. She was as small and soft as he remembered. Flawless. *Lovely*.

Gideon had a desperate urge to take her face in his hands and ask her what was wrong, to make her tell him why she was so upset.

He shook off the temptation.

This was what she did to him: made him completely irrational.

She's a coldhearted seductress. Don't let her deceive you.

Rune had opened her mouth—probably to insult him further—when the shouts of several guards made them both freeze. Boots thudded in the corridor. They must have heard the bottle shatter and were now in search of its source.

Gideon glanced around the powder room. The only exit was the door behind him, which opened into that same corridor. The moment the gun went off, he'd give his location away. And with no exit, the guards would corner him.

He'd be as good as dead. *Worse* than dead. If they arrested him, he'd be at Cressida's mercy. He couldn't fall prisoner to her again. Gideon would take his own life before it came to that.

The pulse in Rune's wrist quickened beneath his thumb. If she called out, they would find him for sure.

"Scream for help," he whispered as the guards drew closer, his gun still pressed to her temple, "and I'll put a bullet in your brain."

"If I stay silent, you'll kill me anyway."

True. But Rune seemed to want to live a little longer, because she didn't scream.

He cursed himself for hesitating. He should have come in, shot her, and left. No thinking. Just doing.

But he'd always preferred the raw, wild Rune to the one hiding behind a mask of style and poise. If he'd found the latter in this room—a beautiful girl powdering her perfect nose, not a hair out of place nor a crease in her dress—they probably wouldn't be having this conversation. She'd already be dead.

Instead, he'd found *this* Rune.

His Rune.

A total mess.

The basest part of him wanted to tilt her head back and kiss her until she told him why she was crying.

No. He gritted his teeth. *That is the opposite of what I want.*

But now that he'd thought it, Gideon couldn't *unthink* it, and his mind pulled him down more dangerous paths. The last time he and Rune were pressed against each other, she'd been beneath him. In his bed. He'd been worshiping her with his mouth. Whispering delicious things into her skin. They'd given themselves to each other in an act that couldn't be undone, and now he was suffering the consequences of that decision.

This girl.

He'd wanted so badly to be worthy of her. He'd dared to hope he could be, stupid fool that he was.

Never again will I fall for her tricks.

"Help me understand," he whispered, listening to the receding footsteps, suddenly needing to know. "You'd put Cressida back in power despite knowing what she's capable of? Do you long for terror and bloodshed?"

"For the people who want to hunt me down and slit my throat?" Rune furrowed her perfect brows. "What else should I want for them?"

He narrowed his eyes. "And when it's all over, and your precious witches are safe, with your tyrant sitting once more on her dark throne, you'll be married to a prince who treats you like a prize. Is that also what you want? To be put on display, like a trophy in a glass case?"

She seemed to hesitate, then tilted her chin in defiance. “Soren will make me happier than *some* men ever could.”

To think he’d kissed the mouth those words came out of.

“You might fool the rest of them, but you don’t fool me. Look at you, Rune. You’re drinking yourself sick to get through an evening with him.” It made him think of himself, not so long ago. And he didn’t like the reminder. “You’ll hate being Soren Nord’s wife.”

“You have no idea what I hate.”

“I have some idea.”

Her eyes crackled like lightning. “You don’t know me at all.”

“I may not know *Rune Winters*,” he whispered, his mouth an inch from hers. “But I know the Crimson Moth. And she is no caged thing.”

Rune flinched. “Stop it.”

“I pity the man who clips her wings.”

“Stop talking.”

“Say goodbye to your freedom, Rune.”

“Shut up!”

She bucked against him, and Gideon nearly lost his grip on her wrists. He’d forgotten how strong she was, despite being half his size. He withdrew his knee to regain control.

His second mistake.

Rune thrust her small knee straight into his groin.

Pain exploded like a bomb, lighting him up. The room went bright white. Gideon doubled over, collapsing to the floor as the unbearable pressure in his balls made the world fade away. He curled his knees to his chest to protect himself, in case she tried again.

Rune picked up his gun. “That’s for handing me over to be purged.”

Gideon groaned, lying in a puddle of whiskey and broken glass and pain.

The door flew open.

The smell of blood and roses filled the room as someone stepped inside.

“Why, Gideon Sharpe,” came a voice that still haunted his nightmares, “what a pleasant surprise.”

Her shadow slid over him, turning his blood to ice. Gideon didn’t look up. He knew who he’d find there: a witch with birch-white hair and eyes as cold as a frozen sea.

Cressida Roseblood.

Gideon shut his eyes.

Fuck.

He’d always told himself it was better to be dead than in Cressida’s clutches. That if he ever fell prisoner to her again, he’d find a way to end it all.

He glanced at his pistol, still in Rune's hands.

Utterly out of reach.

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FOUR

GIDEON

GUARDS GRABBED GIDEON'S ARMS and hauled him to his feet, locking his wrists into manacles behind his back.

Cressida approached. Her hair was damp, as if she'd ridden through a storm to get here. And her gaze was a knife plunged into his chest. Gideon's pain vanished, replaced by a numbing fear.

This was his worst nightmare come to life.

Cressida glanced from him to Rune, who held Gideon's gun and was still aiming it at him. A question flared in the young witch queen's eyes, but she didn't voice it. Only held out her hand to the guards, demanding the key to his chains.

"Ava, I need you," Cress told the young woman who'd come in with her. "Everyone else: get out."

Gideon recognized the girl who stepped forward: Ava Saers. A witch and former scar artist to the Rosebloods. During the Sister Queens' reign, wealthy witches employed scar artists—talented artisans adept at cutting casting scars to form beautiful patterns in a witch's skin. The Roseblood sisters liked to carve each other's scars, but would partake of Ava's artistry on special occasions. He remembered watching Ava carve with almost delicate ease into their skin.

She was one of the first witches the Crimson Moth had stolen from his holding cells.

Ava's auburn hair was knotted fashionably to one side of her head, and her sapphire gown shimmered in the candlelight as she walked toward her queen. She must have been a guest at the recital tonight.

How many other witches is Soren giving sanctuary to?

After popping open her sequined clutch, Ava withdrew a small knife.

Cressida unclasped her cloak and let it fall to the floor, giving Gideon an unobstructed view of both arms. Silver scars covered every inch of her skin, each one painfully familiar to Gideon. Like a garden of flowers starting at her wrists and twining upward, growing toward her shoulders.

Ava pressed the knife to Cressida's skin and started to cut, adding petals to a lily in the botanical pattern.

The smell of Cressida's magic bloomed in the air: the coppery tang of blood mingled with the sickly sweet scent of roses.

When Ava finished, Cress dipped her fingers into the blood seeping up. Gideon blanched as the witch queen crouched, smearing bright red spellmarks across the floor before him. Magic thickened the air, making him nauseous as her spell took hold.

Thick, invisible ivy crawled up his legs, securing him to the floor. The magic didn't stop there: it climbed up his arms and chest and shoulders. Immobilizing him.

Gideon strained against the spell. His muscles bunched and his teeth clenched. As if his will alone could break the bonds of her magic. But the more he struggled, the tighter it bound him.

Cressida's spell held him fast.

You deserve this.

If he hadn't hesitated at the sight of Rune's tears, if he'd simply pulled the trigger, he'd be riding back to Caelis right now, his mission accomplished.

Cressida rose to her feet and walked toward Gideon before pausing.

"Rune?" She glanced over her shoulder. "Did you hear what I said?"

Gideon looked past the witch queen to find Rune still in the room, standing a few paces beyond them. She seemed frozen in place, the pistol in her hands trained on him, her gray eyes unreadable.

Their gazes locked. An invisible charge electrified the air.

End this. Put me out of my misery.

She knew what Cress had done to him in the past. She knew what Cress would do to him now.

"Rune." He stared her down, pleading. "*Shoot.*"

Her eyes were a raging storm. If she pulled the trigger, it would not be out of pity but something much stronger.

Cressida stepped between them. “Give Ava the pistol.”

Like a severed thread, the command snapped Rune out of whatever thoughts ensnared her.

“The *pistol*, Rune.”

Rune glanced down at the gun in her hands. And then, like a good little foot soldier, she handed it over to Ava.

She didn’t look at Gideon again. Just turned and walked away, shards of glass crunching beneath her shoes. The door swung shut behind her, leaving Gideon alone with Cressida and her scar artist.

Like she didn’t care at all.

Ava walked to the sink and set his gun down on its ceramic edge, then stared into the mirror as she fixed her makeup.

“Look at us. Reunited at last.”

He tore his gaze from the door Rune had exited, returning his attention to the enemy in the room. Cressida Roseblood was beautiful—in a cold, terrifying way. Like being lost in a blizzard, knowing it was going to kill you.

Blood dripped down her arm and smudged the fingers of her hand. She stopped a foot away from Gideon and drew out her casting knife. Pressing its flat, crescent edge beneath his chin, she forced his gaze to hers.

Running the edge of the blade down his throat, she said: “Did you come to Larkmont alone?”

His mouth went dry. “Yes.”

She walked around him, trailing the knife across his shoulders, stopping at his back. He felt her slip the key into his manacles, then twist. The chains rattled to the floor.

He tried to reach for the knife, for *her*, but his freed hands were still bound by her spell.

Cressida continued circling, dragging her blade over his body, until she faced him once more. Hooking her knife into the collar of his stolen jacket, she tugged downward, popping open the top button. Gideon heard the rip of his undershirt beneath.

His heart pounded.

“And your purpose here?”

“To assassinate Rune Winters.”

She continued, popping the next jacket button, tearing his undershirt further. “Why?”

Gideon swallowed. “To stop her from securing an alliance between you and Soren Nord.”

“And was she happy to see you?”

Gideon paused, not understanding the question.

Cressida sliced swiftly downward, cutting open the jacket and the shirt beneath. The fabric fell open, revealing Gideon’s chest.

The corner of her mouth curled as her gaze slid from his throat down. He knew that look. It made him break out in a cold sweat.

“You stole everything from me, Gideon.”

“I’m pretty sure it was the other way around.”

“I want to forgive you. I do.”

Forgive *him*?

“After you murdered my sisters, I wanted you to suffer. I’ve had a lot of time to think about what I’d do to you, once I had you in my hands again. And I’ve realized ... well, I’m *indebted* to you.”

He stared at her.

Had she gone mad?

Cressida took his jaw in her grip, forcing him to look at her. Her ice-blue eyes chilled him to his core.

“You made me realize how much I took my sisters for granted. How much I *need* them. Elowyn, Analise, and I are so much stronger together. Which is why”—she bared her teeth in a smile—“I’m going to bring them back.”

She’d definitely gone mad.

“Your sisters are nothing but bones in the ground.” He didn’t know this for certain. Analise and Elowyn’s bodies went missing in the chaos of the New Dawn. People had assumed the corpses were stolen and defiled or thrown into the mass graves reserved for witches killed in the revolution.

“Oh, Gideon.” Cressida laughed. “You think I’d let my sisters rot?” She shook her head, sending her pale hair scattering like snow. “I hid their bodies somewhere safe. For two years, I’ve kept them preserved with magic.”

“That’s not possible.”

But this was Cressida Roseblood. He knew exactly what she was capable of.

“A resurrection spell simply requires the sacrifice of a close kin—someone with strong blood ties to the deceased.” She tilted her head, narrowing her eyes. “I could do it in my sleep.”

“Your entire family is dead,” Gideon pointed out. “You don’t have any kin.”

“Oh, but it turns out I do.”

He frowned. *What?*

“A long-lost sibling.” She smiled. “Unfortunately, I don’t know who or where they are. All the sibyls in my employ can’t see them. Someone’s concealed them with an ancient spell—for now.”

A missing Roseblood heir?

Dread filled his chest like lead. Cressida alone was one thing. She might retake her throne, but she’d struggle to hold it by herself. With the purgings, witch numbers had drastically declined. People remembered the tyranny at the Reign of Witches’ end, and they would not welcome its return. She’d have to use force and fear—which was precisely why she needed Soren’s army.

Does Rune know about this?

Elowyn and Analise were the more powerful—and the more vicious—Roseblood sisters. They had tortured Gideon’s mother and were the reason both his parents were dead. If Cressida resurrected them, it would mean the return of all three witch queens. Together, they would end the New Republic.

“But enough about that.” Cressida’s hands coasted up the lapels of Gideon’s jacket, pushing it and his tattered shirt back over his shoulders and down his arms, staring all the while at the brand seared into his pectoral.

Her brand.

“Let’s talk about *us*. I’m doing this for your own good, Gideon.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” he said, trying to figure out what *this* was.

“In order to forgive you, I need to trust you.”

She came closer, until only a sliver of space separated them. Gideon’s entire body tensed against her closeness, her spell holding him fast.

“And in order to trust you, I need to ensure you’re mine.” She traced her casting knife softly over his exposed collarbones. “Mine *alone*.”

He could not revert to past Gideon—the pathetic boy who crawled back to her night after night. Like an abused dog returning to its master, hoping maybe this time, he would get kindness instead of a kick in the ribs.

You’re not that Gideon anymore.

That Gideon had no choice but to submit to her. The lives of those he loved were in her hands.

“You can’t escape me,” she said. “Even when we were apart, I’ve haunted your every step. Prowled your every dream. Haven’t I?”

Gideon gave a tight smile. “In truth, I never think of you.”

“Liar.” Her mouth snarled. She pressed her knife back to his throat. “A horse once broken can be broken again. By dawn, I’ll have you begging for me. Just like the old days.”

The thought of it scared him more than anything.

Gideon stared her down, trying to conceal his fear. “Do what you like to me. I won’t grovel to you again.”

Where had he learned to lie, so boldly, to his enemy’s face?

Perhaps he’d learned it from Rune.

“Everyone I love is dead,” he said as she pressed the cold steel of her knife to his skin. “You have nothing left to bind me to you.”

Cressida’s eyes glittered like ice. “If that were true, you’d have shot the Crimson Moth and walked out of Larkmont before anyone noticed her missing.”

He frowned. *What?*

“I see the way you look at her, Gideon. You once looked at me the same way.”

Gideon nearly laughed. “At *Rune*? You’re mistaken.”

“Rarely.” Her voice flattened. “I’m not blind. Rune is beautiful. I understand why you’d be tempted.”

Tempted?

“I’m the opposite of tempted. My feelings for Rune are as dead as my feelings for you.”

Cressida smiled. “Fine. I’ll play along.” She pressed her hands to his bare chest. He couldn’t tell if her skin was cold as a corpse, or if that was just the effect she had on him. “Just remember: I don’t need you willing, Gideon. I only need you obedient. And I *will* have your obedience...”

She pressed her palm to the brand seared into his pectoral.

“I left something here, the day I branded you.” She tapped her fingertips against the raised edge of the scar: a rose inside a crescent moon. Her insignia. “A spell I intended to activate long before now, but never got the chance.”

She leaned in and pressed her lips against the scar.

Gideon shivered, his body wanting to recoil. But no matter what she did, he couldn’t fight back.

“This is going to hurt,” she murmured.

Hurt was an understatement.

Pain flooded Gideon like lightning. Scorching hot. Bright white. As if she were branding him all over again. Only this time, there was no red-hot iron pulled from the fire and held to his skin. No burning flesh.

But the pain was just as intense.

One minute, Gideon was trying not to flinch. The next, he was screaming.

It seemed endless, this fire. Burning him from the inside out. Making him wish for death—or at the very least, the vicious stab of Rune’s knee between his legs. That pain was nothing compared to this.

Rune.

He latched onto the memory of her. The defiant tilt of her chin. The lash of her insults. The whiskey bottle sailing toward his head.

It was nonsensical. They hated each other. But the moment Gideon tried to focus on something else, the pain rushed in again, overwhelming him.

So when the pain grew to agony, his mind sharpened on Rune alone. The smell of her skin; the alcohol on her breath; the heat of her pressed between him and the wall.

But soon, not even the memory of her was enough, and the fire spread, devouring Rune, burning her out of him.

Only when Gideon begged for death did it stop.

Cressida pulled her hand away and the pain dissolved. Gideon would have collapsed if not for the spell fixing him in place. Sweat beaded his hairline and dripped down his back. His entire body shook from the pain.

At the sink, Ava still faced the mirror, reapplying her makeup.

Cressida stepped closer.

“Tell me you missed me,” she whispered, running the tip of her finger down the center of his chest. “Tell me you never stopped thinking about me.”

Gideon tried to slow his racing heartbeat. Tried to remain calm. Whatever happened, whatever pain she inflicted on him, he could not give in to her. He needed to be made of cold hard iron this time, not flesh.

Her eyes flashed like shards of ice. “You can have my love, Gideon. Or you can have my wrath.”

Is there a difference?

Sliding her arms around his neck, she pressed herself against him, lifting her mouth to his. “What’s it to be, darling?”

Gideon stared at the wall behind her, trying to prepare himself for what was coming. If he hardened himself, if he willed himself to feel nothing—to be as emotionless as the pistol resting on the sink—it wouldn’t matter what she did.

“Will you come to me willing, or shall I force you?”

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FIVE

RUNE

IN THE HALL, RUNE fell back against the powder room door, hands clenched, anger squalling through her.

Whatever she'd once felt for Gideon Sharpe was gone. *Gone*. This feeling coursing through her? It was the opposite of love; it was fiery, insatiable *hate*.

What kind of girl falls for someone who despises her very nature? Who wants her *dead*?

A pathetic, self-hating one.

Rune refused to be that girl any longer.

Forget him.

There were spells for erasing memories. Rune wished she knew some, so she could raze every memory of Gideon Sharpe from her mind. Because even now, he was closer than her very breath. Rune felt the Blood Guard captain as if he still had her pressed to that wall. The scrape of his unshaven cheek. His mouth, inches from hers. The heat of his gaze, burning her up.

Rune wanted to scream. Wanted to push off this door and stride away, putting him behind her forever.

Except Cressida was in that room with him.

Gideon had told Rune what the witch queen had done to him. But there were things Gideon *hadn't* told her, she knew. Sickening things. Things Cressida would do again, if he ever fell back into her clutches.

He's in her clutches now.

Rune squeezed her eyes shut.

It was why he'd begged her to shoot: he'd rather be dead than face what Cressida had in store for him.

He came here to kill you, she reminded herself.

Rune didn't want to care about Gideon—who *definitely* didn't care about her. If he did, he wouldn't have put that gun to her head. He wouldn't have come all the way here intending to end her life.

His agonized scream filled the hall.

The sound lit her up. Like a switch being flicked.

Rune spun to face the powder room door, her heart pounding in her chest.

Gideon's screams grew louder.

Rune clenched her hands so hard, her fingernails dug into the skin of her palms. She might hate him for what he'd done. He might be her worst enemy. But that didn't stop the sound of his agony from tearing her apart.

What is she doing to him?

Rune stepped toward the door. She grabbed the knob, wanting to wrench it open. She wanted to ...

Do what?

Helping Gideon would require defying Cressida. And while Rune might be valuable to the witch queen, she wasn't *invaluable*. Rune couldn't walk in there and tell her to stop. Cressida would laugh in her face—or worse: hurt him more.

And even if she *could* rescue him, Gideon would only try to kill Rune again—and probably succeed next time.

But if I do nothing?

When Gideon's screams fell silent, the quiet was worse. At least if he was screaming, Rune knew he was alive.

He just tried to murder you! He doesn't deserve your pity, or your help.

But there was something nagging at Rune. Something she couldn't shake.

Gideon had had the upper hand in that room. He could have taken his shot long before she ever looked into the mirror and saw him. Likely, he could have shot her long before she even *entered* the powder room.

So why did he hesitate?

She shouldn't care. Not at all. Not even the tiniest bit.

"Rune!"

She looked back to see Soren running toward her, his cape gone and the tailcoat of his jacket flapping behind him. Four soldiers flanked him. "They said you were attacked..."

Rune needed to let the knob go. The prince was her duty, not Gideon.

"I'm taking you to my rooms." Soren grabbed her arm and forced her to face him. His expression was stony as he scanned down the front of Rune, checking to see if she was damaged. "This fiend may not have acted alone. There could be other assassins lurking in my halls."

Rune glanced back to the powder room door. *But I can't leave him.*

"I won't let him harm you." He pulled her away. The sharp smell of his cologne burned her nose. "You'll stay in my quarters. I'll post my personal guards outside the doors."

"But I—"

“I want you to stay there until I tell you it’s safe to come out.”

Rune stared over her shoulder at the powder room door. Willing it to open. Willing Cressida to bring Gideon out and hand him over to the palace guards, who would march him down to whatever cells lurked beneath Larkmont, where he could rot for all Rune cared.

But the door remained shut. And now it was getting smaller, and her chest was getting tighter, and when Soren dragged her around a corner, it disappeared from view completely.

Rune felt sick.

I have to do something.

But what?

She had no reason to ask Soren to turn back. And it’s not like Cressida would stop hurting Gideon simply because Rune wanted her to. Rune would have to force her—and that was impossible. Cressida was a far more powerful witch, despite Rune’s advancements under Seraphine’s tutelage these past two months.

And Cressida was their only chance of saving the witches they’d left behind.

Rune couldn't defy her.

"I'm starting to understand the danger you live under," said Soren. Two guards opened his bedroom doors, allowing him to usher Rune inside. "I could *kill* that man."

"Whatever you'd do to him..." Rune watched the guards shut the doors behind them. "Cressida will do worse."

The lamps were dimmed. It took a moment for Rune's eyesight to adjust to the dusky light. The heavy smell of incense burned, filling the air with cinnamon and sandalwood. When the room's details became clearer, Rune noted its contents: a canopied bed, a wardrobe, a dressing table.

"I'm going to lock you in," said Soren. "I'll return when I'm certain the palace is safe and you're no longer in danger."

Rune wasn't listening. She was still thinking about how she had no power to stop Cressida from hurting Gideon. No leverage. Nothing to barter for him with.

But Soren does.

The thought flared inside her.

Soren had already turned toward the door. This was his estate. His father's *kingdom*. And not only that: Cressida desperately needed his army.

Rune couldn't ask him to save the man who'd tried to assassinate her. But she didn't need Soren to save Gideon. She just needed him to get Gideon away from Cressida.

"Doors and guards won't keep me safe," she blurted out.

Soren stopped and glanced back, taking in her disheveled state. Rune knew how she looked: tearstained, roughed up, every bit the victim. Beneath his rage—how dare another man touch *his* fiancée—was the same look she'd seen earlier.

Hunger.

For *her*.

Normally, that hunger made Rune feel like a cornered animal. Tonight, she would use it to her advantage.

She tugged him to the bed. Brushing aside the canopy, Rune took hold of his shoulders and pushed him downward, until he was seated at the bed's edge and his polished boots were planted on the floor.

"I will never be safe until Cressida retakes her throne," she said, holding his gaze. Hiking her dress to her thighs, Rune climbed into his lap, straddling him, then slid her arms behind his neck. "I will always be in danger until Cressida, with the help of *your* army, puts all witch hunters to death."

Rune ignored the sudden bulge in his pants. If she weren't worried about Gideon, it would have repulsed her. But Rune was only half here; the other half of her was in the powder room.

This was what she was good at: Seduction. Deceit. Spinning webs of lies to ensnare her prey.

"I must confess," she whispered against his clean-shaven cheek. "I wasn't sure about this betrothal before tonight. I thought you were only marrying me to show me off, like an interesting piece of art."

Her hands dropped to his, guiding them to her hips.

Soren's gaze slid from the golden dress bunched around her waist to her pale thighs.

“And now?” he breathed.

She eased herself further into his lap. “Now? I think fate intervened at the opera. I think she wanted you to protect me.”

“Hmm,” he murmured, lowering his mouth to her neck.

Rune tilted her head to give him easy access. Normally, she would have recoiled at his kisses. Now she felt nothing. She’d played this game hundreds of times before. It’s how she’d saved so many witches.

Tonight, Rune felt foreign to herself. Like it wasn’t really her sitting on Soren’s lap, nor was it her hands running through his hair. Like this girl was a ghost, and the real flesh-and-blood Rune was somewhere else.

You’ve spun the web, she told herself, now bait it.

Every minute she wasted was another minute of Gideon at Cressida’s mercy.

“Do you remember the surprise I mentioned?” she asked, feigning a small gasp as Soren’s teeth scraped her collarbone.

“How could I forget?” he murmured against her skin.

“It’s a holiday,” she said. “You and I are going to Caelis for the weekend. I’ve booked everything. The dinners, the ballet, the hotel room...”

At the words *hotel room* Soren pulled back. His blue eyes darkened, the pupils dilating. Probably imagining what the two of them alone in a hotel room would mean.

Forcing Rune to imagine it, too.

One day, I'll have to spend every night in his bed.

Soon, it wouldn’t just be a weekend. Once they were married, it would be the rest of her life.

Her skin prickled.

Soren’s hands roamed freely now. Up her thighs. Under her dress.

I know the Crimson Moth. And she is no caged thing. Gideon’s voice brushed her mind like a whisper. I pity the man who clips her wings.

Rune grabbed Soren's wrists, halting his progress. "I need you to do something for me."

His breath shuddered out of him. "Yes?"

"Seal the alliance with Cressida *tonight*. And then tomorrow, we can celebrate in Caelis."

Cupping the back of her neck with both hands, Soren angled her face to his. "Fine," he said, moving in for another kiss. "I'll find her as soon as—"

"No." Rune pressed herself flush with him. "Find her *now*. And don't take no for an answer."

"All right, all right." Soren chuckled, mistaking her motives entirely. He gave her thighs a squeeze. "Consider it done, my darling."

Dragging himself away from Rune and the bed, he gave her one last hungry look before ordering his soldiers to stand guard at the door.

And then he locked her in.