

TWENTY-SIX

GIDEON

RUNE WASN'T IN THEIR cabin. Gideon could only assume she'd used her invisibility spell to elude him. If she didn't want to be found, he wouldn't find her.

He turned to the mirror on the clapboard wall, its surface cloudy with age. Pulling off his shirt, he stared at the brand on his chest. The scar still flared ember-red and was hot to the touch.

Gideon remembered the tiny sound Rune had made when his fingers stroked down her throat. Every muscle in his body tightened at the thought of that sound. Of her throat. Of *her*.

He could never be with Rune, even if he wanted to be.

Cressida had made sure of it.

He wanted to put his fist through the glass. To take a jagged piece and cut the brand out of his skin. He was about to search the room for Rune's casting knife to do just that when a knock on the door stopped him.

Hoping it might be Rune, he swung it open.

It was Abbie.

Her auburn curls were loose around her shoulders, and her white blouse was half tucked into her pants.

This wasn't great timing. But it had been Abbie he'd initially gone to find after the argument with Rune. Now that she was here, he might as well use the opportunity to ask if she was Harrow's spy.

Abbie stepped into the room, shutting the door behind her, forcing Gideon to back up a step.

"We need to talk," she said.

He nodded, wishing—not for the first time—that the room was far bigger. "Agreed."

“This must be more than a coincidence, right? You and me. On the *Arcadia*. The last week before I transfer out of here, and *you* show up. Isn’t that strange?”

This was good. They could finally be clear with each other. But before he could ask her if she was working for Harrow, Abbie continued: “There are things I need to say, Gideon. And if I don’t say them now, I’ll always regret it.”

He frowned. “Huh?”

“I don’t care what your reasons were for marrying her—to get out of trouble, to rectify some scandal—I can help you. I’ll get you out of it. I’ve been saving up for years now, and ... I have means. I can settle whatever debts got you into this mess.”

Gideon’s frown deepened. *Debts?* “What are you talking about?”

Abbie closed the space between them and took his hand. “You don’t have to pretend with me.”

He glanced down to find her fingers interlaced with his. “Abbie, what—”

Suddenly, she was pushing up on her toes.

And pressing her lips to his.

Whoa. Okay. This was *not* where Gideon had thought this was going.

He was about to pull away and apologize for whatever he'd done to lead her on—but there was a question burning in the back of his mind.

Would the curse activate?

Is it only Rune who triggers it? Or can anyone?

He cupped Abbie's neck and kissed her back.

The seconds ticked by. Old memories from after the revolt seeped up. The two of them, together. But the images were hazy. Like a book he'd once read and all but forgotten.

Gideon felt nothing: no flaring scar; no excruciating pain.

It should have brought relief, but it didn't. Because neither did he feel anything else. No unquenchable thirst. No fusing of two souls. Kissing Abbie was nothing like kissing Rune. The former only made him want the latter.

Is this how it's going to be?

Had Rune utterly ruined him?

Enough.

Gideon took hold of Abbie's arms and thrust her back a step. She opened her eyes, looking dazed.

"Are you the spy Harrow planted on this ship?"

Abbie's brows knit. "What?"

"There's a spy on board, searching for a witch named Rune Winters. They're working for Harrow."

"I..." She shook her head. "I told you: I ran away from all that."

She seemed too stunned to be lying. But if it wasn't her, who else could it be?

"Do you have any idea who the spy is? You said you spoke with Harrow the last time the *Arcadia* was in port."

"She and I didn't talk about work." Abbie stepped away from him. "Did you not hear anything I just said? About you and me?"

Gideon pulled in a breath. He was being rude.

"Abbie. Whatever you and I once had, it's in the past."

"Then why kiss me back?"

Gideon touched his scar. "I'm sorry. I needed to answer a question."

Her voice trembled. "But ... why would you marry her, unless you had to?"

It's not a real marriage.

It's what he should have said. But he was thinking of Rune in the boiler room, pouring out her heart to him.

"Why indeed," he murmured.

Stricken, she took another step back before turning and fleeing the room.

Gideon ran both hands over his face. *Merciful Ancients*. How had he gotten himself into this mess?

Oh, right.

Rune.

Rune had gotten him into this mess. Rune, who was still missing. So long as her invisibility spell hid her, she'd be safe. But her earlier illusion had worn off. This one might, too. And if her crimson moth signature was found ...

He paced the limited floor space in their cramped cabin, the floorboards creaking beneath his weight. If he were a spy closing in on a witch, would he keep his distance, waiting to strike? Or would he get in close, perhaps be friendly, and lower her defenses?

He halted, recalling the young man who'd been circling Rune like a hawk ever since they boarded.

William.

What if Gideon was wrong about him?

It might not have been Rune who lured William down to the boilers. It might have been the other way around. Gideon hadn't asked her; he'd assumed.

What if William was circling her not because he was a cad who wanted her in his bed, but because he was an assassin who wanted her in a grave?

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

TWENTY-SEVEN

RUNE

RUNE FINISHED HER PICKLOCK spell and pulled open the door to the cargo hold. The engine's thumping quieted as she stepped into the darkness within. After fumbling around, she found the chain for the nearest gaslight and tugged.

The room illuminated.

Black coal was piled high along two walls and in the middle of the room. Like small mountains. The other wall was packed with wooden crates—likely containing supplies for the ship.

There was no luggage in this hold. And if there was no luggage, there was no reason for the hunting hounds to check it before departure.

It was exactly what she needed to get a few witches out.

The gaslight flickered as Rune walked around the piles of coal and across the room, trying to estimate how long they'd need to hide themselves here. With the *Arcadia* sympathetic to their cause, it wouldn't matter if they were found after disembarking from the New Republic. It was when the ship was still in Republic waters that they were in danger. If they could conceal themselves until the ship was out at sea, they'd be safe.

The door shut behind Rune, making her jump.

"I had a feeling I'd find you here."

She spun to discover William standing in the hold with her, unbuttoning his jacket. Her heart pounded. Could he see her because *Ghost Walker* had faded? Rune's skin was sticky with sweat from the boiler room's heat. Combined with the steam, the spellmarks for *Ghost Walker* may have already faded.

Or could he see her because he expected her to be here?

"William!" With her pulse racing, Rune managed to smile. "You startled me."

"Did I?" The corner of his mouth curled as he shrugged out of his jacket and set it down on a crate.

Unease churned in her stomach.

"I should get back," she said, starting toward the exit. "Before Gideon comes looking for me."

William blocked her path. "Oh, don't worry about that. Your husband has his hands full. He and Abbie are in your cabin. I'm sure they'll be a while."

Rune halted, her heart sinking like a stone.

He took a slow step toward her. “You deserve someone who sees you, darling. A man who reciprocates your adoration.”

Rune took a step back, trying to keep some distance between them. “I think you have the wrong impression.”

“Oh?” he said, coming closer.

“I’m ... in love with my husband.”

The backs of Rune’s legs hit something hard. She glanced over her shoulder to find a crate behind her, and several more stacked behind it. When she turned to him again, William was directly in front of her.

“That’s the sad thing, isn’t it?” William lifted his hand. Ran the backs of his fingers across her cheekbone.

Rune stiffened beneath his touch.

“It’s obvious to anyone with eyes that you pine for a man who doesn’t want you.” He tucked a lock of stray hair behind her ear. “Unlike your husband, I knew from the moment I saw you that you were special.”

Through the cloth of her dress, Rune checked the knife she kept strapped to her thigh. She would use it if she had to.

But only if she had to.

“I’m flattered,” she said. “Truly. But I’ve had too many men in my life lately. I’m trying to pare back...”

She ducked under his arm, whirling to face his back as she moved toward the door. She’d gotten what she came here for. This room was big enough to hide three witches—herself, the sibyl, and the missing heir—though it might be tight.

“Do you like cards?” she asked.

William didn’t bother following. Only pivoted to watch her with a look that made her skin prickle. When she’d finally put enough space between them, she turned toward the door, her back to him. “We could go upstairs and play a round of—”

“I was hoping for something more intimate.”

The click of a cocked pistol made Rune freeze.

“Turn around, Crimson Moth.”

The breath shuddered out of her.

He knows who I am.

Rune stared at the door, contemplating making a run for it. William had left it open a crack.

His clothes rustled as he moved toward her.

“Turn around, *witch*, or I’ll shoot.”

Rune let out a slow breath and did as he said.

The barrel of his gun was pointed at her head.

This was it, then. Her flirtatious games had finally caught up to her.

Except I never flirted with him.

He'd lavished his attention on her without provocation. Now she knew why.

"Gideon Sharpe doesn't act like a husband because he *isn't* one, is he? Can you explain to me why a Blood Guard captain is smuggling a fugitive witch back into the New Republic?"

Rune's gaze darted to either side, looking for something to defend herself with. There was nothing but coal and oversized crates. And by the time she grabbed her knife from underneath her dress, he'd have put three bullets in her.

This was the end. And Gideon didn't even know where she was.

Nor does he care.

The gaslight flickered again, changing the shadows behind William.

“I’ll make you a deal, Rune Winters.” William stepped closer. “If you come back with me to my room, I won’t shoot you.”

The insinuation of what he would do to her in that room was unmistakably clear.

Rune lifted her chin, staring him down. “I’d rather be shot.”

“And if I don’t give you a choice?”

The shadows moved again. Only this time, it wasn’t because of flickering lights.

A few paces beyond William, someone stepped out from behind a tower of crates, silent as a wolf. Gun drawn. Rune’s pulse hummed as his furious gaze met hers over William’s shoulder.

Gideon.

The sight of him lit a flame inside her.

When had he entered the room?

William took another step toward Rune, oblivious to the man behind him.

Before he came an inch closer, Gideon said, “She said no, *William*. Didn’t your parents teach you that when a girl says no, she means it?”

His voice was like a barrel full of gunpowder, ready to be lit.

William went still as a statue.

“You’re not her type,” Gideon continued. “That’s what she’s been trying to tell you. You should have taken the loss and left her alone.”

William licked his lips, staring at the door over Rune’s shoulder. “And what *is* her type, Captain Sharpe?”

Rune studied the witch hunter in the shadows. *Stupid brutes, apparently.*

“Drop the gun,” said Gideon.

William narrowed his eyes, pointing it more firmly in Rune's direction.

"Drop. The. Gun."

His voice was a dangerous growl.

The pistol clattered to the floor at William's feet.

"Kick it toward Rune."

The pistol came skidding toward her. Rune bent to pick it up. The metal was still warm from his grip.

"Go back to the cabin, Rune. I'll finish this."

Rune frowned. "What are you going to do?"

Gideon's angry gaze flickered to hers. "Send him to the bottom of the sea. It won't take long. I'll meet you in our room."

TWENTY-EIGHT

GIDEON

GIDEON WANTED NOTHING MORE than to send this insect of a man overboard. The way he spoke to Rune, *looked* at Rune, made Gideon's skin crawl.

Unfortunately, he needed William alive.

"With respect, Captain Sharpe," said William, his back to Gideon, his hands in the air. "You had orders to kill the Crimson Moth. So why is she alive, pretending to be your wife?"

"You can lower your hands," said Gideon, who kept his gun trained on the spy. With Rune gone, he needed to convince William of his plan. And he wasn't likely to have much success if he continued to torment him.

William's arms dropped.

“Harrow knew you weren’t able to go through with it.” He slowly turned to face Gideon. “That’s why she sent me to do your job for you. But now you’re interfering with *my* kill orders. How many times are you planning to betray the Republic?”

“The only person I’m planning to betray is Rune.” Gideon lowered his gun, but kept it cocked. “Which is why I need your help.”

William’s forehead creased.

“I need to bring the Crimson Moth in alive.”

William crossed his arms, studying Gideon. “I’m listening.”

“We were wrong to think killing her would stop this war from coming—it won’t even delay it. Soren will give Cress an army anyway, as revenge for his dead fiancée. It was the wrong plan from the start.”

“And you have the right one?”

“Cressida isn’t only plotting a war. She’s plotting to raise her sisters from the dead.”

William's eyes widened.

"Our main goal," Gideon continued, "should be destroying her before she can set all her plans in motion. And the best way to destroy Cressida is to use Rune as a bargaining chip. To do that, I need to deliver Rune into the New Republic so I can set a trap for her and the long-lost Roseblood heir she's going to summon."

Gideon had William's full attention now.

"And this is where you come in: I need you to convince Harrow to trust me."

"You're not exactly in a position to ask for trust."

"Nevertheless, I'm asking you to report this back to her. All I need is one week. If, in a week, the Roseblood heir isn't dead and I haven't delivered the Crimson Moth into Blood Guard hands, Harrow can kill me herself."

William fell silent, thinking it over. "All right. I'll report what you've told me."

"One more thing."

“Pushing our luck now, are we?”

Gideon lifted his pistol, aiming it directly at the center of William’s forehead. Reminding him who exactly was lucky here—lucky to still be alive. “I need to get Rune past the witch hunters and their hounds when we make port. If I manage to do everything I’m planning, I’ll make sure the Good Commander knows you helped me. It’ll mean a promotion, and a pay raise. But first you have to do me this one favor and make sure no hunting hounds set foot on this ship or anywhere near it before we disembark tomorrow. Can you do that?”

“I think so. Yes.”

“Good.” Gideon lowered the gun and put the safety back on. “Stay out of sight. I need Rune to think you’re dead.”

“Fine,” said William, turning to leave.

Gideon called out: “And tell Harrow the next time one of her spies gets in the way of a job, I won’t be so gentle with them.”

William paused before the door, which hung open, revealing a steamy boiler room beyond. “For someone running out of chances, you make a lot of threats. Don’t forget what the punishment is for sympathizing with witches. They don’t carve a letter into your forehead anymore and send you on your way.”

No. With Cressida on the loose, they couldn't afford to be so lenient. Now, sympathizers were taken out back and shot.

"Screw this up," said William, "and it'll be over for you. When it is, I'm coming for your little Moth."

It took everything in Gideon not to raise his gun and fire.

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TWENTY-NINE

RUNE

CLOUDS OF STEAM PRESSED in on Rune as she listened to William's footsteps thud away from the cargo hold. The metal wall was hot against her back, but the rage in her heart was hotter.

Gideon's words rang in her mind: *The only person I'm planning to betray is Rune.*

She'd suspected as much. Of course she had. She'd simply hoped for something else.

Hope is for fools.

How many times did she need to learn that lesson?

Rune's heart pounded as Gideon stepped past her, following William out. The steam mostly concealed her, but if he wanted to find her, he could. All he had to do was turn around and *look*.

But Gideon didn't look. Just followed William through the boilers and up to the level above. Their feet thudded on the metal catwalk overhead while Rune waited for her heart to calm.

This is good, she told herself. It's a reminder.

Gideon was her most dangerous enemy. He would only ever hand her over to those who wanted her dead. Everything she'd admitted to him tonight didn't matter. He didn't care. All that mattered to Gideon was stopping Cressida.

His plan was like a bucket of ice water, waking her up.

She couldn't lower her guard with him again. If she wanted to stay alive, to do what she intended, she needed to cut out these deadly feelings at the root. If Gideon was plotting to betray her, she needed to betray him first.

Rune pushed away from the wall. Steam swirled around her as she made her way back through the boiler rooms. Trying to come up with a way to outwit the Blood Guard captain.

When she returned to their cabin, she found it empty and remembered what William had said about Gideon and Abbie.

Did he go to her room instead?

She shoved the thought away.

Abbie can have him.

She didn't want to sleep in Gideon's shirt again, but neither could she put on the silky thing she'd packed for a weekend getaway with Soren. So she climbed into bed in her shift.

When the door finally opened—minutes or hours later, Rune couldn't tell—Gideon stepped into the room, closing the door behind him.

Where were you? she wanted to ask, but she pretended to sleep instead. Because did she really want to know?

She felt his attention fix on her, steady and intense. Beneath it, Rune's throat went dry as sand. She desperately wanted to swallow, to moisten her mouth, but feared that small sound would give her away.

She kept her eyes shut and her body still, but she couldn't stop her pulse from racing at the clinking sound of his belt unbuckling and the rustle of his clothes coming off, piece by piece, then dropping to the floor.

When he pulled back the sheet she slept under, Rune tried to think of something else—anything else—than a mostly naked Gideon getting into bed with her. Not so long ago, Gideon and Abbie had been alone in this room, doing Ancients knew what. The mattress dipped beneath his weight. Rune stiffened to stop herself from sinking with it and dipping toward him.

The room fell silent.

“Rune?”

She swallowed.

With less than three inches of space between them, his heat curled toward her. His familiar smell infused the air. Every nerve in her body sparked at his proximity.

Rune clung to her side of the bed.

He loathes you.

“That kiss...”

The memory flashed in her mind: his hands in her hair, his mouth against hers, the heat of his body pressing her to the wall.

“Please,” she whispered. “Let’s forget it ever happened.”

Gideon drew in a breath. He was silent for a long moment.

“If that’s what you want,” he finally said.

“It is.”

Silence descended again. Soon, the sound of his breathing came slow and even.

How was she supposed to sleep with him lying right next to her? When all she could think about was his plot against her, and how he and Abbie would celebrate together when the Crimson Moth finally got what she deserved?

Several hours later she gave up trying.

Quietly, she got dressed and left Gideon behind, escaping for a walk along the upper deck's promenade, trying to clear her head. The sun peeked up from the horizon, turning the sky pink and silhouetting the island in the distance.

When the Sister Queens ruled, the island country had been called *Cascadia*. Rune remembered the old map that once hung in Wintersea House, *CASCADIA* printed in bold letters at the top, greeting visitors when they arrived.

But once Nicolas Creed, the late Good Commander, rose to power, he renamed it. The maps now read: *The Republic of the Red Peace*. Everything bearing the former name was considered contraband and destroyed in the revolution. Even the coins, which bore the old name, were melted down and recast into new ones.

Rune had kept Nan's old map as an act of rebellion and hid it away in the cellars of Wintersea.

“Did you miss it?”

Rune straightened, her body recognizing a predator.

But there was no threat in his words. A few seconds later, Gideon stepped up next to her, dressed in Soren’s shirt and pants, the seams nearly bursting as they tried to contain his muscled form. He leaned over the railing, staring toward the island ahead.

From the dark smudges under his eyes, he looked like he’d gotten about as much sleep as she had.

Rune stared at him for a long moment, letting her eyes trace over the planes of his face before tearing her gaze away and looking toward their home.

“Yes,” she whispered. “With my whole heart.”

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PART TWO

We witches were given a precious gift, and with that gift comes a sacred task. The Ancients bestowed magic on us for one purpose: to use for the good, the true, and the beautiful.

My cousin intends to twist this purpose with vicious lies. I feel them spreading through my court like poison, a little more every day, infecting even my closest advisors.

I fear I can no longer stop her. The worst is imminent.

Tonight, I will go to the stones and ask for Wisdom's help.

—FROM THE DIARY OF QUEEN ALTHEA THE GOOD

THIRTY

RUNE

“HOW DID YOU MANAGE it?” Rune tried not to slip as they made their way down the rain-slick gangway. “There isn’t a single witch-hunting hound in sight.”

She knew how he’d done it, of course. She just didn’t want to give him a reason to think she’d overheard his scheming with William.

The sky was moody overhead. Black clouds sat on a gray horizon, letting them know it had recently stormed, and might storm again, if it felt like it.

“I had someone take care of it,” Gideon said, carrying their luggage beside her.

Right, thought Rune. Just like you’ll take care of me, soon enough.

But the moment she stepped off the dock and onto the busy wharf, her dark thoughts scattered. Rune felt like a ship dropping anchor after months adrift on an ocean of tempestuous waves. The island beneath her was steady. Secure.

She breathed in, and with the salty air came the smell of sea and rain. Of lichen and juniper forests.

Tears pricked the corners of her eyes.

Of home.

But for Rune, home meant danger. This was witch-hunting territory, and here her life was forfeit. She couldn’t walk the New Republic’s streets as herself. Not to mention: Gideon’s plan was now set in motion.

She needed to be especially careful.

Rune had cast *Ghost Walker* before disembarking, in case they were walking into a trap. It had been Gideon's idea, oddly enough. As if he half expected one.

But if they were walking into a trap, it was yet to be sprung.

"Can I borrow your horse?" Rune asked.

She needed to get to Wintersea House. Needed it like she needed air to breathe and water to drink.

Wintersea was safe. Wintersea was *hers*.

If Gideon didn't lend her his horse, she'd have to rent one from the city stables. Rune had packed enough money to get her through the next week or so. She didn't want to be here any longer than that.

"Where are you planning to go?" he asked.

"Home," she said as she walked across the wharf, toward the city streets. "To Wintersea. Once you have the sibyl, bring her to me. In the meantime—"

“Rune ... you can’t.”

Can’t? Rune scoffed. If he thought she was going to stay here in the city with him—

“Wintersea House is the residence of Noah Creed now.”

Rune stopped in her tracks.

What?

“He claimed it after you left.”

Left. Like she’d had a choice in the matter. Rune hadn’t *left*. She’d been forced to flee for her life.

Her hands curled into fists. All her things now belonged to the Good Commander’s son? Her books and clothes and casting room; Lady, her beloved horse; Nan’s gardens and the pine needle path through the woods to the beach ...

All Noah's.

"Where am I going to go?" she whispered.

"My apartment," said Gideon, turning onto the street and heading toward Old Town.

Rune stared at his back, feeling like she might burst into tears.

But what choice did she have?

THE LAST TIME SHE was inside this tenement building, Gideon handed her over to the Blood Guard.

The time before that, she gave herself to him, body and soul, when they made love in his bed.

When she stepped through the door, flashes of memory hit like a gale-force wind—his mouth grazing her thigh, his cold voice ordering his soldiers to arrest her.

A war of emotions raged within her. She felt dizzy with them all.

Though she'd been to his parents' tailor shop downstairs a few times, she'd only been to his apartment once—on the night she spent in his bed. It had been dark then, with only the moon shining through the windows to illuminate things.

Now, daylight laid everything bare.

The main room was sparsely furnished. On one side stood a small kitchen with a woodstove; on the other, a sitting area with a sofa and shelves. The sofa was worn, but not threadbare. The floorboards beneath her feet were warped and scuffed, yet sturdy. And she even spotted books on the shelves.

As she made her way over to read their titles, a wooden figurine no bigger than her palm grabbed Rune's attention. Someone had carved the pale wood into the shape of a deer. Its smooth curves called to Rune, and she picked it up.

"It was Tessa's," said Gideon, shutting the door behind them. "My father made it for her."

Rune knew almost nothing about Alex and Gideon's little sister, except that she'd died young. Killed by Cressida.

Rune ran her fingers over the deer, which exuded a kind of warmth despite being made of nothing but wood.

Nan had bought Rune dozens of toys as a child. Too many, probably. But no one had ever *made* Rune a toy. She found fragments of Levi Sharpe in the chiseled surface, where the man had skillfully shaved away wood to expose the form beneath. He'd left his marks; something to say he'd been here, that he loved his daughter.

Realizing her knuckles were turning white, Rune loosened her grip on the deer.

"I'm going to shower," Gideon said from behind her. "And then I need to report to the Commander. Are you hungry? I don't have much food, just some apples and hardtack under the sink. But there's a day market a few streets over where you can buy food to cook."

Cook?

Her?

Rune lowered the deer and stared at Gideon.

"Right." He ran his hand over the back of his neck, glancing at the ceiling. "You don't know how to cook."

“I have servants for that,” said Rune, defensive.

Or rather, she’d *had* servants for that. Now she had nothing.

He sighed. “Never mind. I don’t want you burning the building down. Wait until I get back, and I’ll make us dinner.”

Rune watched him disappear down the hall. Who’d taught him to cook? His mother? His father?

She glanced down to the deer figurine in her hand, wondering what that would be like: Having a mother and father. Being taught to cook.

Rune wouldn’t have traded Nan for anything in the world, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t curious. What was it like, growing up in a family like Gideon’s? Parents. Siblings. A house full of people, teeming with life. The loneliness nipping at her heels for years suddenly caught up, sinking its teeth into Rune.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The pounding scattered her thoughts.

Rune went to the window and glanced out.

Half a dozen soldiers in red uniforms stood outside the door below. She drew back, keeping out of sight and sucking in a breath.

Had Gideon summoned the Blood Guard? Had they come to arrest her?

It made no sense. If he wanted her arrested, he should have let them discover her on the *Arcadia*. They could have taken her straight to prison from there.

“What...” Gideon emerged from the hall, his shirt half-unbuttoned, his feet bare. He glanced at Rune, heading for the window.

His mouth thinned into a grim line. “Damn it.”

The pounding increased.

“How do they know I’m here?” Rune backed away, nearly tripping over the coffee table.

“They’re not here for you,” he said, re-buttoning his shirt and striding across the room to check the windows on the other side. “They’re here for me.”

“Why? What did you do?”

“It’s what I *didn’t* do.” Gideon unlocked the pane, then swung it out. “They’ll want to search the apartment.”

Rune joined him at the open window, peering down into an empty alleyway below.

“I’ll help you up.”

She frowned at him. “Up *where*?”

“Onto the roof.” He took her hips in his hands and lifted her into the pane. With no other options, Rune got her feet under her, then gripped the pane. The roof was directly overhead, a little slanted, but not enough to be steep. “Here. Take this up, too.”

Gideon left and came back with her suitcase as the pounding on the door down below grew more insistent. Grabbing the leather handles, Rune hefted it onto the tiles overhead, then crawled up after it.

“Stay there until I return.”

“And if you don’t return?”

“Then you’re on your own,” he said, before swinging the pane shut.

Wonderful.

A moment later, muffled voices entered the apartment below. Rune took off her shoes to ensure she didn’t slip, then kept low to the rooftop tiles as she scurried toward the roof’s peak, lined with chimneys. Keeping herself hidden, she peered down to the street below, watching as two Blood Guard soldiers brought Gideon out, his hands bound in front of him.

They forced him onto a horse, and then rode toward the palace.

She heard booted footsteps inside as the remaining soldiers searched his apartment. Only when they, too, left, taking their horses with them, did Rune relax. Pressing her back to a chimney, she sank to the sun-warmed tiles and let out a breath.

Feeling a sudden roughness beneath her palm, she lifted her hand. Three names were scratched into the tiles: *Tessa. Alex. Gideon.* The Sharpe siblings must have played up here as children.

That's how Gideon knew where to hide me.

Nan would have killed Rune if she'd ever tried to climb onto a roof.

Her fingers traced the names, lingering on his. Wondering what trouble he was in, and if he would return—or if she'd be forced to find her way down and rescue him.