

FORTY-SIX

RUNE

RUNE LICKED THE SEA salt from her lips as the unfurled sails of Alex's boat ballooned overhead. Her *Ghost Walker* spell kept the craft concealed as they headed out to open sea. The wind was against them at first, making them easy prey for bigger, faster ships. So Rune cast *Tempest*—a spell from Seraphine's repertoire of elemental castings.

It was designed for sailing, and when combined with a compass showing which direction a witch wished to go, the spell summoned a strong wind to fill a boat's sails, propelling the craft much more quickly toward its destination.

Rune kept expecting to see a ship in pursuit. To find Gideon at the stern, giving the order to subdue her.

But there was only the sea, rising and falling, everywhere around her.

Aurelia didn't look back once. She sat with her face in the wind, holding Meadow close, shivering in the cold night air. At one point, Rune slid Gideon's jacket off and handed it to Aurelia, who used it as a blanket to wrap the child in.

The island shrank behind them. As the fear of being caught ebbed, Rune ran her hands along the *Aria's* polished wood, thinking of Alex. How he was saving her once again. She glanced at the stars, sending out a silent thank-you, wondering if it could reach him beyond the grave.

When they left New Republic waters, Rune finally settled in, glancing back one last time as her home disappeared for good.

If she made it to the Continent, the first thing she'd do was find Seraphine and tell her she was running away. Somewhere neither Cressida nor the Republic's witch hunters would find her. Perhaps Seraphine would come with her. If not, Rune would get a message to her once she was safe.

The salt spray dampened her hair. The wind stung her cheeks.

Will you miss me, Crimson Moth?

Rune shut her eyes against the memory of his voice.

She should be happy his plot had failed. She'd eluded him; she should be celebrating.

But instead, a chasm had opened inside her.

You are a knife in my heart.

They sailed on.

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

FORTY-SEVEN

RUNE

THEY SAILED INTO UMBRIAN waters five days later, assisted by Rune's enchanted wind. While at sea, Rune taught Aurelia how to sail so they could take turns sleeping. It was morning when she navigated them up the fjord's dark waters leading to Larkmont, where she dropped anchor near Soren's estate, keeping out of sight.

Alex's boat had proved a sturdy escape craft, and Rune intended to use it to take them further south. Right now, though, she needed to sneak inside Larkmont, grab supplies for the rest of the journey, and find Seraphine.

She hoped to do all of this without being seen.

Cressida couldn't know she was back. The witch queen would expect her to make good on her promise to marry Soren, and Rune didn't want to think about what Cressida would do to force her hand. Especially after Rune's last act of defiance.

Before she jumped into the waves, Rune took off her boots so they wouldn't fill with water and weigh her down.

"You'll be all right here?" she asked Aurelia. Dropping her boots in the boat, Rune glanced back. Aurelia's long hair was stiff with sea salt. She wore Gideon's jacket to keep out the cold and looked like she hadn't slept in days.

I'll stay with the boat, Aurelia had told her when they entered the fjord. *I have no desire to run into Cressida.*

Aurelia, it turned out, vividly remembered Roseblood cruelty and wanted to keep Meadow far away from it.

"We'll be fine," Aurelia said, her hand on her daughter's head as the girl played with the compass she'd found belowdecks.

Rune looked on with a small smile before diving into the dark water.

The icy cold stunned her. It took several moments for her body to recover from the shock. When it did, she swam for the shore.

She was halfway there when the *crack* of flapping sails made her pause.

To keep the boat hidden, Rune had lowered the sails. But when she looked, not only did she find them hoisted, but she saw Aurelia drawing up the anchor.

“What are you doing?” she called, treading water.

Aurelia reached into the pocket of Gideon’s jacket. “I found this on the boat shortly after we left the island.” Pulling out some small object, she threw it in Rune’s direction.

It plopped into the water.

A jewelry box.

“If I showed you, you would have gone back for him. And I couldn’t let you do that.” Aurelia pulled the anchor over the side, dropping it in the boat’s interior. “I can’t let them catch us again.”

The tiny box bobbed on the waves before starting to sink.

“What are you talking about?” Rune grabbed the box before it descended too deep and couldn’t be retrieved.

“I’m sorry.” Aurelia sat down at the rudder. From the way her voice trembled, she sounded truly remorseful. “I have a child to think of. I need to get Meadow somewhere safe.”

And before Rune could think of how to stop her, Aurelia turned the boat around and started sailing out of the fjord. Abandoning Rune.

She watched, dumbfounded, as Alex’s boat—her escape craft—disappeared into the distance. She’d risked her life to get Aurelia and her child to freedom, and *this* was how the sibyl repaid her?

What am I going to do?

She could steal a horse and ride for Caelis. Or perhaps commandeer one of Soren’s boats. But the prince’s sailboats were large, sophisticated crafts requiring whole crews to manage. Rune doubted she could handle one by herself.

The sea's chill was seeping into Rune's bones, and her teeth began to chatter. She needed to get out before hypothermia set in. She could figure out the rest once she was on dry land.

So, with the jewelry box clasped in her fist, she turned and swam for shore.

Wading out of the water and onto the rocks, Rune pushed back her sopping hair, held up the tiny box, and opened it.

A folded, waterlogged note sat inside. As Rune unfolded it, a small coin dropped into the sand, catching the light.

She picked up the coin, holding it up to the sunlight. A hole was punched in the silver, and a thin chain was fastened on.

A penny. But not just any penny.

A word stamped into its surface warmed Rune's shivering body.

Cascadia.

She flipped it over. Queen Althea's face stared out at her, pressed into the silver.

Althea had ruled over Cascadia for a quarter century, during a period of peace and stability. She was the last queen to commune with the Ancients—or so some believed—and legend had it that Wisdom could often be seen walking with her in the royal gardens.

After the revolution, coins like this one had all been melted down. Like the old maps that had to be burned, there were to be no reminders that witches once reigned in the New Republic. The Good Commander wanted history erased.

Someone must have kept this contraband, or found it—at the back of a drawer, perhaps, or between the cracks in some floorboards—and turned it into a necklace.

But why?

She glanced at the note in her other hand. The wet paper was translucent, and Rune had to squint to make out the words written in washed-out ink.

Rune—

I hope you find the freedom you're looking for.

Yours, Gideon

Rune stared at the note. She couldn't make sense of it. It was Gideon's handwriting. But the words ... the coin ...

I found this on the boat shortly after we left the island.

But what was a gift from Gideon doing on Alex's boat?

Unless ...

Rune's heart plummeted into her stomach.

He put it there for me to find.

Which meant he knew she would use Alex's sailboat to escape.

If he knew, why didn't he stop me?

Rune recalled the guards swarming the waterfront, descending on her and Aurelia's hiding place. The only reason they hadn't found and seized them was because ...

He called them off.

Rune thought back to that night. To the hammer of her heart as Aurelia cocked her gun, ready to shoot. To the relief that flooded her at the soldier's shouted command.

We're needed on the other side of town. Captain's orders. All hands. Make haste!

Gideon had drawn the Blood Guard away, allowing Rune to escape.

She hadn't outwitted him.

Not at all.

And now he'll be accused of sympathizing with witches.

He likely already had been.

If the Good Commander knew Gideon had let Rune go, Gideon was as good as dead.

Rune glanced up from the note, staring across the sea, feeling like she'd made a terrible mistake. Like she'd abandoned half her soul behind in hell.

Did he have a change of heart at the eleventh hour, or had Gideon been deceiving them all for a while now? And if so, when did he decide to let her go?

If she'd paid attention, she might have figured it out. But now Gideon's life was forfeit, and there was nothing she could do. An ocean sat between them, and Rune had no way to cross it.

An urge to leap into the sea and *swim* back overcame her.

Would he have come with me, had I asked?

But even if she had, where would they go? She and Gideon could never be together.

Not in the New Republic, perhaps. But the world is a vast place.

Why hadn't she asked him?

Aurelia was right. Rune couldn't let Gideon die. Not after he'd saved her life.

And if they've already executed him?

Rune had to believe he was alive—that he would find a way to skirt death long enough for Rune to save him. Slipping the necklace over her head, she rose to her feet.

I have to go back.

She walked barefoot on the sand, following the shoreline until Larkmont came into view. Her gaze lingered on Soren's private wharf, where several sailboats were docked, all too big for one girl to manage alone.

But a witch?

With the right spells, a strong enough witch could sail one.

Rune's gaze lifted to Larkmont. Cressida was in there. Cressida, who kept dozens of spell books in the room she was staying in.

All Rune had to do was sneak inside and find the right one.

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

FORTY-EIGHT

RUNE

THE PRISTINE HALLS OF Larkmont were quiet and still. As Rune crept through them, veiled by *Ghost Walker*, she overheard two guards talking about Soren's trip to the capital, saying his fleet was ready to sail for the New Republic.

Had Cressida and the other witches he'd given sanctuary to joined him there? It would explain the empty palace.

If Cressida was in Caelis, her spell books would likely be with her.

Am I too late?

Rune quickened her pace. Arriving in Larkmont's guest quarters, she walked up to the witch queen's suite and pressed her ear to the door. She heard no voices or movement within, so she opened the door and slipped inside.

Marble columns held up the bedroom's high ceilings, and the lavish furnishings announced that only privileged guests ever slept here.

No breakfast tray sat on the terrace, waiting to be collected. No clothing was strung about. Nothing was out of place.

Is she already gone?

A breeze from the next room brought a whiff of old magic. Rune followed the scent, hurrying through the archway, passing the private bath, and entered the parlor meant for retiring in the evenings.

The open windows let in a breeze. It ruffled the curtains, sending sunlight flickering through the quiet room. The air smelled strongly of blood and roses—a telltale sign Cressida had used this room for casting. Rune's gaze snagged on a packed suitcase lying on the sofa as if waiting for someone to collect it. Next to the suitcase sat a leather book bag.

Hope flared in her.

Cressida must have left her things to be packed and brought to the capital for her.

Rune opened the bag, pulling out the spell books to look for sailing spells strong enough to help her guide a large ship on her own. The first book consisted of elemental spells, and while some might be helpful—changing the current or tide; calming a strong wind or changing its direction—they weren't what she needed.

Rune pulled out the next and skimmed its pages, recognizing several love spells. She tried flipping past them, only to end up in a section on love *curses*. None of which were useful to her.

Rune was about to toss the entire book aside when the memory of Gideon stopped her. His brand burning beneath her palm, growing hotter by the second. The way he tore away from her, trembling with pain.

It happens when I touch you.

Fury curled like smoke inside Rune.

She stared down at the book on her lap. Instead of setting it aside, Rune flipped back, searching for the spell Cressida had used to hurt Gideon.

She found it soon enough:

TRUE LOVE'S CURSE is an Arcana spell. It prevents a victim from being with his true love by inflicting pain whenever he touches her skin to skin.

The words made Rune dizzy.

They'd both assumed the spell kept Gideon away from Rune, specifically. But this was something else. This was intended to keep Gideon away from his true love. Which meant ...

It happens when I touch you.

Swallowing the strange lump in her throat, Rune kept reading.

Once cast, TRUE LOVE'S CURSE cannot wear off. Only the blood of the victim's true love, spilled in a sacrificial act, can break it.

What kind of sacrificial act?

Rune scanned down the page and found spellmarks for the counterspell at the bottom. There were three in total. She stared at them.

Those three spellmarks were all it would take to break the curse?

And the blood spilled in a sacrificial act.

The sound of a creaking door made Rune freeze.

“Make haste.” Cressida’s voice floated through the archway. “In order to sail at dawn tomorrow, we must arrive in Caelis *tonight*.”

The witch queen’s footsteps grew louder. Rune’s pulse thumped wildly as she shut the spell book and quickly rose to her feet, heading for the windows. *Ghost Walker* concealed her, but the last time she’d used her invisibility spell to hide from Cressida, she was sure the witch queen had still sensed her in the room.

Not wanting to chance it, Rune stepped behind the curtains, clutching the book of spells.

The footsteps stopped.

“What’s—”

“*Hush*,” Cressida hissed, silencing whoever was in the room with her. Probably eyeing the open satchel and the spell books scattered across the sofa. There hadn’t been enough time to put them away.

Rune held her breath.

A slight breeze at her back told her the window behind her was open. She could turn and climb out. Cressida would never know it was Rune who’d been in here, only that someone had been rifling through her things.

But her mind was on *True Love’s Curse*.

On the instructions for breaking it.

Namely: *the blood spilled in a sacrificial act*.

Cressida’s shoes clicked on the tiles as she drew closer to the curtains.

If Rune wanted to escape, she had to go *now*.

But she suddenly knew what was required to break the curse. The terrifying thought of it made her stomach clench.

What if I'm wrong? What if it doesn't work?

Cressida stood directly before her now, on the other side of the curtain. Rune heard the breaths she took. Felt the chill of her presence.

Was Gideon worth the risk?

Rune touched the coin hanging around her neck.

Yes.

Gideon had endured unimaginable things under the Reign of Witches. And yet, somehow, he'd emerged with his soul intact. The proof: he'd forfeited his life so Rune—a *witch*—could go free.

Cressida yanked aside the curtain. Clutching the stolen spell book to her chest, Rune looked up, meeting her queen's furious gaze.

“You.”

Rune had never been more terrified.

As Cressida’s eyes dropped to the book of love spells, her mouth twisted in a mocking smile. “Oh, Rune. Unlucky in love?”

Rune’s anger ignited. She lifted her chin. “I suppose I should thank you. If not for your curse, I wouldn’t have irrefutable proof that he loves me.”

Cressida’s nostrils flared. Grabbing Rune’s jaw, she slammed her head hard against the window, cracking the glass and sending a stab of pain through her skull.

Despite the shock of it, despite Cressida’s ferocious grip tightening on her jaw, Rune stared the queen down. “Touch Gideon again, and I’ll make you wish you were dead.”

Cressida leaned in, whispering close to her ear. “Do you know what I do to those who threaten me?”

Oh, Rune knew.

Do your worst.

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

FORTY-NINE

RUNE

CRESSIDA DRAGGED RUNE INTO the bedroom. Juniper—the witch who’d accompanied her into the suite—held Rune in place while Cressida drew a ring of bloody symbols on the floor encircling her.

“Step back, Juniper.”

The witch stepped away, her eyes full of pity.

The spellmarks ignited, glowing bright white and forming a complete circle around Rune, like a prison cell. Only instead of steel bars closing her in, it was magic. Rune had seen Cressida use this binding before. Once inside the ring, you couldn’t exit.

Rune looked up and saw Cressida circling her, an ensorcelled whip looped at her side. It looked like lightning in her hands, white and crackling.

Releasing the whip from its coil, Cressida narrowed her eyes.

“You think you can protect him from me?”

She lashed the whip. It struck Rune’s back, ripping her skin from shoulder to hip. The pain lit her up.

In shock, Rune dropped to her knees.

“Once I have my throne...” Cressida’s footsteps echoed as she walked around the circle.
“... the first thing I intend to do is hunt Gideon down.”

Another lash struck. Tearing fabric and flesh. Splitting Rune open.

Rune cried out—a raw, animal sound she didn’t recognize. It frightened her almost as much as Cressida’s whip.

There was nowhere to run. She was completely at the mercy of a corrupted witch who wanted her dead.

“If you kill me, Soren won’t give you his army,” Rune gasped, desperate to remind Cressida of why her life was valuable.

“Soren is in Caelis. As far as he’s concerned, you’re still kidnapped in the New Republic.”

An icy dread spread through Rune.

“Once he learns your kidnappers killed you, he’ll hand me the rest of his army in a rage, to do with as I want.”

Another lash caught Rune across the shoulder. She clenched her teeth to stop the agonized sounds escaping her. As fresh blood gushed from the wounds, soaking her shirt, two more lashes sliced open her back.

Rune kept her knees tucked beneath her. She pressed her forehead against the floor, struggling to breathe, using her arms to protect her head while leaving her back exposed. An easy target, her back took the brunt of the lashes, sparing her softer, more vulnerable parts.

Cressida whipped her mercilessly. Ceaselessly. Until Rune’s blood soaked her shirt and pooled on the floor.

Her skin was ablaze. The room bled to red. She no longer held back her screams.

Too soon, the soothing numbness of unconsciousness called to her, and Rune slipped toward it.

No. Not yet.

Cressida's whip didn't stop, slicing Rune's back to ribbons. Her entire body shook as she huddled in a puddle of her own blood.

Blood.

The thing that made Rune a witch. The source of her power.

There's something I still have to do.

As the lashes rained down, she thought of Gideon's curse.

Only the blood of the victim's true love, spilled in a sacrificial act, can break it.

This was what she'd been waiting for.

The lashing ceased as Cressida paused to catch her breath, gathering her strength before finishing Rune off.

Barely conscious, Rune recalled the unnamed spellmarks required to break *True Love's Curse*. Pushing herself up on trembling forearms, Rune dipped a finger in the sticky red blood and started to draw.

She hadn't gotten the chance to tell Gideon she loved him.

Perhaps this will suffice.

Weakened, it took her longer than it should have. Before she finished the second symbol, Cressida readied her weapon.

Forcing her mind to clear, gritting her teeth to hold off the pain and stay conscious, Rune completed the second and third symbols.

It should have been a relief. But even as the magic swelled, making her skin tingle and her ears roar, Rune knew she wasn't finished.

"What are you doing?"

Rune's moth signature must have materialized in the air.

Touch Gideon again and I'll make you wish you were dead.

She couldn't kill Cressida. But maybe she could do the next best thing.

"You think *you* can stop *me* with a counterspell?" Cressida threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, Rune..."

Before Cressida's final round of lashes began, Rune drew two more symbols, altering the first spell. Hoping it would work. Hoping her sacrifice would be enough.

Magic surged again, swirling around her. Binding the new spell to the first.

The whip came down, catching her off guard and engulfing her in pain. Rune's forearms refused to hold her upright and she collapsed. Her cheekbone hit the tiles. What little strength she had left fled her body.

Rune lay on her side in a pool of blood.

Get up.

The room went dark at the edges.

Get ... up ...

Cressida's shadow slid over her.

Metal scraped against leather as Cressida drew her knife.

Rune closed her eyes, waiting for the killing blow.

"It pains me to do this, Rune. But I know incurable defiance when I see it. Such a pity. You had so much potential—"

BANG.

The door burst open.

Rune's vision blurred; the darkness dragging her under.

"That's enough!"

Someone stepped in front of Rune. Shielding her from Cressida.

Seraphine?

"You will heed me."

Her voice was like a clap of thunder.

"Heed you?" Cressida cackled. "For all I know, you're in league with her."

The voices seemed a world away.

Just before the darkness claimed her, she heard Seraphine say:

“You will heed me, my queen, because Rune is your sister.”

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

FIFTY

RUNE

WHEN RUNE WOKE, THE room was rocking. Tipping from side to side. Creaking loudly as it did.

She opened her eyes, but everything was hazy. There was a bed, and sheets tucked around her. The scent of magic hung in the air, stale and faded. Mingling with the smell of the sea.

Somewhere nearby, glass clinked. She heard water being poured. Turning her face toward it, Rune found a figure silhouetted by the light.

“Where am I?” The croak of her voice surprised her. Rune swallowed to moisten her throat.

“Entering New Republic waters,” said a feminine voice.

Rune frowned. That couldn’t be right. She was supposed to be at Larkmont.

“You’ve been in and out of consciousness for several days. You lost a lot of blood.”

We’re on a ship, Rune realized as her vision cleared and cabin walls solidified around her.

And the witch tending to her was Juniper.

Rune tried to sit up and immediately regretted it: fiery pain blazed up her back. She gritted her teeth and went still.

“Here.” Juniper sat down on a chair beside the bed, holding out a glass of water. “Drink.”

Rune eyed it carefully. But even if she was being drugged, her thirst won out, and she let the girl press it to her lips.

Rune gulped the water down.

“My spells slowed the bleeding and mended the torn muscles and tendons,” said Juniper, rising to replenish the empty glass. “I sped up the healing, but it will hurt for some time.”

Rune remembered the lashes raining down; the whip slicing across her back. She remembered the warm, sticky blood on the floor.

I'm her sister.

The horror of it sank into Rune, chilling her all over. She was a Roseblood. Heir to a cruel witch dynasty. Sister to a terrifying murderer.

That's why Juniper was here: to keep Rune alive. Cressida had likely ordered the girl—who was known for her knack with healing spells—to stay by Rune's side.

She needed Rune alive to cast the resurrection spell.

Why didn't Nan tell me?

Juniper poured more water from the pitcher, then returned to Rune's side, holding out the glass.

Rune shook her head, refusing the water. "Can you help me up?"

Juniper looked reluctant, but did as Rune asked, carefully taking hold of her arms and pulling her to a seated position.

Rune's back screamed in protest.

She clenched her teeth, enduring the pain, and sat up. The room spun. Not only had she lost a lot of blood, she hadn't eaten in days. Her weakness made that clear.

Feeling lightheaded, she pushed herself to the bed's edge and stood up slowly. With every inch she moved, the pain became more bearable, until finally she was at the porthole, looking out.

A fleet of ships surrounded them, their stacks pumping smoke into the sky. Rune recognized Soren's insignia emblazoned on their sides.

A familiar island loomed in the distance, silhouetted against the setting sun.

Cascadia.

Was this it, then? Were witches at war with the New Republic?

Rune was about to turn away from the porthole when she caught sight of her reflection in the glass. Her face was sickly pale, and bruise-like shadows hung under her eyes. She looked like a ghost.

If this is what the front of me looks like, how much worse is the back?

Rune glanced at the tarnished mirror hanging on the cabin wall. While Juniper looked on with pity in her eyes, Rune took hold of her shirt's hem and dragged it up over her head. Scorching pain flared up her back, bringing tears to her eyes. Rune clenched her teeth, determined to see the damage.

Lowering the shirt to her side, she turned, glancing into the mirror. Dozens of thick, red lines stood out against her white skin. Covering her back like a web.

It looked hideous.

Rune shut her eyes against the sight of her ruined body.

The sound of footsteps in the hall made her fumble with her shirt, trying to pull it back over her head without passing out from the pain.

She'd barely gotten it on when the door opened.

"What are you doing?" Seraphine stepped inside, her worried gaze falling on Rune. "You should be resting."

Promise me you'll find Seraphine Oakes, my darling. She'll tell you everything I couldn't.

It was the last note Nan ever wrote her.

Seraphine had known who Rune was this whole time. And she'd chosen to keep the truth from her.

"Why?" Rune demanded, emotions flickering through her: anger, betrayal, grief.

Seraphine shut the door behind her and came toward the bed, which stood between them.

“How could you keep such a secret from me?”

Rune felt unmoored. Everything that could be taken from her had been. Nan. Wintersea. Alex. Her position in society. And now this: everything she’d believed about her own history.

Rune was the orphaned daughter of two people who’d died in a tragic accident at sea—that’s what she’d been told. But it was a lie. One Nan herself perpetuated.

Why?

“Kestrel and I believed the less people who knew, the safer you were.”

“Yes, but you kept the secret from *me*! I’m perfectly capable of keeping secrets, and I deserved to know.”

Seraphine glanced at Juniper, who silently excused herself from the room.

“You have every right to be angry,” said Seraphine, sitting down on the bed. Her movements reminded Rune of a dove settling down in its nest: gentle, graceful.

She held out her hand for Rune to take.

Rune ignored it, crossing her arms, wincing as the raw skin of her shoulder pulled. “I have a right to know the truth.”

“Yes. You do.” Seraphine dropped her hand. “You’re the daughter of Queen Winoa and her second consort. On the night you were born, the midwife had difficulty turning you around, so she called for me. I managed to turn you, and less than an hour later, there you were, in my hands. But the moment we touched, something ... woke up inside me.” Her gaze dropped to the bed. “I cast an illusion, making the midwives believe you were stillborn. I lied to the queen, saying you were dead. And then I delivered you to Kestrel Winters to raise.”

“What do you mean, something *woke up* inside you?”

“The Roseblood family was dysfunctional and depraved,” said Seraphine, but she didn’t meet Rune’s eyes as she said it. “I couldn’t let an innocent child grow up in that environment.”

Presumably, Cressida and her sisters had been innocent once, too. So why didn’t Seraphine take *them* away?

“I don’t believe you,” said Rune.

She wasn't being told the whole story. She could sense it. And there was still the matter of Seraphine's age ...

"Nan told me the two of you grew up together. She used to wear a locket around her neck, and inside were two images: one of her at eighteen, and one of you, not much older."

Seraphine nodded. "I remember it."

"You look the same now as you did in that portrait painted forty years ago. How is that possible, unless you're under some kind of spell? Are you cursed?"

Seraphine drew in a deep breath. It shook as she let it out.

"It's *like* a curse, I suppose. Certainly, it feels like one." Seraphine stared toward the porthole, which showed a patch of blue sky. "I have a task to complete, and until it's done, I can't ... move on."

Rune frowned harder. *Move on?*

Was she some kind of spirit? Trapped here after her death due to unfinished business?

There were stories of such things, but Rune had never believed them. And the woman on the bed was clearly made of flesh and bone. As solid as Rune herself.

Seraphine patted the mattress beside her, inviting Rune to join her.

Reluctantly, she sat.

“It feels like yesterday you were this tiny creature swaddled against my breast as I rode for Wintersea House. And here you are, all grown up.” Seraphine’s expression softened as she studied Rune. “I keep looking for her in you—which is absurd, I know. You share no blood. And yet, I glimpse her sometimes. As if you carry her with you.”

Seraphine touched the bird-shaped scar on her neck.

“The night I brought you to Kestrel, she was so angry with me. She’d never wanted children, and at first refused to take you. She said if I were going to steal a royal baby, the least I could do was raise it myself.

“But I couldn’t keep you in the capital to be raised under Winoa’s nose. It was too dangerous. The queen was already suspicious of me by then. I was the only witch on her council who didn’t hide my disgust for her cruelty. I didn’t loathe her in private and flatter her in public, like the others. She knew exactly what I thought: that she was a plague on Cascadia.

“Three days after I brought you to Wintersea, as if sensing my deception—Winoa exiled me. She wouldn’t tolerate me undermining her authority anymore. If I didn’t leave, she warned, I’d be dead by morning. I rode straight to Wintersea, where I convinced Kestrel to keep you until it was safe for me to return. I didn’t trust the queen not to send her spies after me.

“Years later, after Winoa’s death, I came back to get you. But by then, Kestrel was in love. You were the best thing to ever happen to her.” Seraphine smiled, remembering. “She told me if I tried to take you, she’d skewer me with a letter opener.”

Tears clogged Rune’s throat. She swallowed them down.

“I miss her,” they whispered in unison.

Seraphine seemed about to say something more, about to reach for Rune, when a sudden *BOOM* echoed from outside the ship. They looked to the porthole.

Cannon fire?

Seraphine rose to her feet and went to look. Rune moved much more slowly, joining her at the porthole.

The ships outside were firing on the harbor.

Rune pressed her hand to the cabin wall, watching the explosions in the distance. The pine boards were rough beneath her palm.

That was her *home* they were sieging.

“So it begins,” murmured Seraphine.