

## FIFTY-TWO

### RUNE

CRESSIDA LEFT A TRAIL of destruction in her wake.

The army retreated. The Blood Guard abandoned their stations. The aristocracy fled to their cottages and summer homes outside the city.

The Good Commander was nowhere to be found.

The ones who remained were the people. Those who had nowhere else to go. They hid behind bolted doors and locked shops. Rune saw them peek out from behind window curtains as she passed, only to hide when their eyes met hers.

The witches took the palace easily. It had been abandoned before they arrived, its marble halls quiet as a tomb. As if waiting for its true master to return. All Cressida had to do was walk in and claim it.

In the throne room, Rune stood between Seraphine and Juniper, close to the back wall. Witches filled the great space, watching as Cressida Roseblood walked up the columned promenade. The windows were dark as the night descended. The black lace train of Cressida's dress trailed behind her. Petals from her rose crown fluttered to the ground.

Tears gleamed in her eyes as she stared at the empty thrones ahead.

Cressida ascended the dais steps and approached the middle throne, caressing the black onyx before turning to face them.

"Tonight, we will finish taking the city." Her voice carried across the great room. "Anyone who swears fealty to me will be pardoned of all former transgressions—except for Blood Guard members and Republic officials. These, along with anyone who refuses to make an oath of loyalty to their queen, will be annihilated."

Cressida sat down on her throne.

"Executions begin at dawn."

Silence filled the massive room at her words.

It was broken by a shout: "All hail Queen Cressida!"

All around Rune, others took up the chant.

“Long may she reign!”

One by one, witches fell to their knees like a dark, rolling sea. Beside her, Juniper got down. Seraphine followed.

*I helped bring this about,* thought Rune.

Soon, she was the only one left standing.

*If I hadn't duped Soren, none of this would be happening.*

Cressida's eyes narrowed. Her eyes pierced Rune's from across the room, that deadly gaze trying to force her to her knees by sheer strength of will.

Memories flashed through Rune's mind.

Cressida drawing back her whip. The heat of the lashes. Her skin tearing open. The puddle of blood beneath her palms.

Rune's heart pounded, trapped in that moment. The terror turning her into a petrified animal.

It reminded her of the revolution. The night the Blood Guard came for Nan.

She'd been terrified then, too.

Holding Cressida's gaze, Rune lowered to her knees.

"Long may she reign."