

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

Chapter 6-10

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SIX

GIDEON

“WHO SHOULD I HURT to make you comply?”

Cressida faced Gideon, her willowy frame mere inches from his. Beyond her, Ava stood at the sink, smoothing her hair.

“One of the staff?” said Cressida when Gideon didn’t answer. “One of their children?” She trailed off, thinking about it. Her hands slid down his chest, dropping to his trouser buttons. “Or perhaps Rune Winters?”

She must have misunderstood the expression that crossed his face, because she continued: “The things I’ve done to you can easily be inflicted upon the Crimson Moth. In fact”—she smiled, undoing the first button of his trousers—“you could watch while I do it. Would you like that?”

Every muscle in his body tightened.

“I think it would be *very* entertaining...”

She started undoing the second button when a knock interrupted them.

Glancing over her shoulder, Cressida narrowed her eyes on the door. Ava turned away from the sink to go answer it.

“Tell them to go away,” Cressida said.

No sooner had she issued the command than the door swung open.

Ava halted as Prince Soren stepped in, looking regal in a navy blue tailcoat, if not a little flustered. Cressida spun to face the intruder, but at the sight of the prince, she reined in her anger.

“My lord.” Her voice was cheerfully restrained. “I’m sorry for the trouble we’ve brought upon Larkmont. As soon as—”

Soren waved his hand, cutting her off. His gaze fixed on Gideon. “Is this the brute who attacked Miss Winters?”

“Indeed,” said Cressida. “I’ve bound him with a spell. He can’t harm you unless I remove it.”

Soren strode forward, stopping directly in front of Gideon. The prince squared his shoulders and drew both hands behind his back, reminding Gideon he was an admiral, not just a prince. They were the same age, but the sea air had weathered Soren’s face, making him appear older.

Gideon was slightly taller, though, forcing Soren to look *up* at him even though Gideon sensed he very much wanted to look down on him.

Staring at the prince, all Gideon could think of were the man’s hands all over Rune. Of Rune drunk and crying at the sink.

Gideon’s thoughts spiraled to places he’d rather not go.

What does she let him do to her when they aren’t in public?

He went hot all over. The beat of his pulse pounded like a drum in the base of his throat.

Soren's lip curled, as if he were inspecting a dead rat. "How dare you touch her."

Gideon knew better than to open his mouth. But he couldn't help himself.

"At least she likes it when I touch her."

Soren's face reddened.

Crack!

The prince's knuckles collided with his jaw and the force of the punch slammed his head to the side. Blood welled in Gideon's mouth. He spat it onto Soren's crisp white cravat.

The man seemed about to throw a second punch—or perhaps wrap his hands around Gideon's neck and choke the life out of him—when Cressida stepped in.

"Let me deal with him, Your Highness. There's no need for you to get your hands dirty."

Seeming to remember himself—he was a prince, he didn’t stoop to the level of rats—Soren stepped back, untying his now bloody cravat and dropping it to the floor.

“I’m afraid your plans for him must wait.” He turned to Cressida, his face still red. “My lawyers have drafted the contract. All it needs is our signatures.”

Cressida’s brows lifted in surprise.

“That’s wonderful.” There was no edge in her voice this time. “But I really should attend to our enemy.” She glanced at Gideon. “Why don’t we sign over breakfast tomorrow?”

“Rune is impatient to be married,” said Soren. “And I know you’re impatient to have your throne back. Which is why I must insist we do this now. I’d rather not risk any more”—he glanced at Gideon—“interruptions.”

Gideon watched a nerve in Cressida’s cheek jump. She clearly loathed the idea of leaving Gideon, but she was outranked. And this was what she wanted: an alliance to help her wage war against the New Republic.

Sliding her casting knife into the folds of her cloak, Cressida glanced at Ava. “Bring him to my chambers.”

At those words, a chill crept over Gideon’s skin.

“We’ll finish this there. I won’t be long.”

Gideon watched the witch queen follow Soren out of the room, shutting the door behind her. When they were gone, Ava pushed away from the wall.

“Come on, then.”

Gideon looked at his pistol, still resting on the sink. There was one bullet left in the chamber—he’d used up the others earlier, getting past Soren’s security. To move him to Cressida’s chambers, Ava would have to remove his magic bindings.

He needed five seconds at most.

The witch slashed her skin with her casting knife, then touched her fingertips to the blood before smearing a bright red symbol across his chest. Her fingers looped and slashed, dragging across his skin. The stench of her magic filled the air, coppery and cloying.

Another spell?

Ava stepped away, smiling. Turning, she walked to the sink and cupped her hands under the water, then let it drip over the symbols Cressida had drawn onto the floor. She ran her shoe across the marks, looking almost bored as she severed the witch queen's spell.

Gideon's muscles tightened as the tendrils of Cressida's magic loosened their grip on him. Releasing his shoulders and arms first, then his legs and feet.

When the spell vanished entirely, Gideon lunged for the pistol.

"Stop!"

It was like running into an invisible wall. His entire body jerked to a halt on Ava's command, his spine going sword-straight.

"Turn toward the door."

In horror, Gideon found himself doing exactly as she ordered.

The spellmark on his chest ...

It binds me to her words.

Whatever she commanded, he'd be forced to do.

"Drop to your hands and knees, witch hunter."

Against his will, Gideon lowered himself to the floor. Before him, shattered glass glittered across the tiles.

"Now *crawl*."

Gideon picked his way through the glass, teeth clenching as shards sliced into his hands and embedded in his knees, leaving a trail of blood in his wake.

He'd been a fool to think he could save himself.

Halfway to the door, he heard footsteps in the hall. He glanced up, watching the handle turn.

Is Cressida back already?

A dread as cold and dark as the sea swept through him.

But when the door swung open, it was an altogether different witch who stepped through.

Her golden dress caught the light, her strawberry blonde hair tumbled in waves down her shoulders, and her gray eyes simmered like a storm.

Rune.

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SEVEN

RUNE

GIDEON WAS HALF-CLOTHED, AND a bloody spellmark blazed across his chest.

The sight of him, *shirtless*, made Rune freeze.

Gideon Sharpe had haunted her these past two months, but the memory of him was nothing compared to Gideon in the flesh. Every line and curve of his body spoke of power and strength.

He must have heard the soft hitch of her breath, because his eyes lifted. The room fell away as Gideon's gaze met hers and his stare held her in place like a spell.

When her eyes dropped to his trousers, she found every button undone.

The sight woke something deadly in Rune.

"What are you doing here, Winters?" Ava materialized from the darkness.

"I came to..." Rune glanced at the pistol lying on the sink beyond Ava. The same one Gideon had pressed to her temple not twenty minutes ago. "... to tell you Cressida has orders for you."

"Cressida already gave me her orders."

"These are new ones." Rune wished she'd had time to come up with a better plan. It wouldn't take Cressida long to sign those papers, and Gideon needed to be gone before her return.

Rune took a small step toward the sink. “She wants you in the prince’s study. To, uh, bear witness to the signing. I’m supposed to watch the witch hunter while you’re gone.”

Ava locked her gaze on Rune. “*You* couldn’t bear witness?”

“She requested you.”

Ava’s eyes narrowed. “Why would she do that, if you were already there?”

Rune was better than this. *Smarter* than this. But escaping the prince’s bedroom—she’d had to go over the balcony and drop to the one below—had taken more time and attention than expected.

“There was a conflict of interest.” Rune took another step toward the sink. “I’m going to be Soren’s wife. I can’t be Cressida’s witness.”

Ava’s voice iced over. “I don’t believe you.”

Knowing she’d lost, Rune lunged for the pistol.

Ava glanced at Gideon. “Restrain her.”

Gideon intercepted Rune, seizing both of her wrists and wrenching her arms behind her back.

What are you doing? she wanted to scream at him. *I came to help you!*

Pain shot up to her shoulders and made the world flare red.

The words died in her throat.

“Cressida will be so disappointed when she learns of your sabotage.” Ava tutted. To Gideon, she said, “Kill the Crimson Moth.”

Gideon didn’t hesitate.

Whipping her around to face him, he locked his hands around her throat and slammed her against the mirror. Glass cracked behind her head. Pain flickered through her.

And then he *squeezed*.

Rune's eyes widened in shock.

Her fingers clawed at his hands, trying to force them to loosen. But Gideon had always been stronger than her, and his grip was a vise. Tighter and tighter. Blocking her air. She wasn't sure if he planned to snap her neck, strangle her, or both.

His dark eyes bored into hers.

Rune's mind blazed with panic.

Please ... I'm trying to save you!

But why would he care?

This was what he came for, remember? You've given him a second chance to see it through.

Ava watched from a safe distance, arms crossed over her chest, unmoved by Rune's struggle. Rune would get no sympathy there.

Which was when she remembered the pistol.

Gideon had shoved her against the mirror directly beside the sink, where his gun still rested. If she could reach it ...

As her lungs burned, crying out for air, Rune's knuckles knocked against the sink's cold ceramic. She patted the edge, her hand shaking ... but the gun was on the other side.

The room blurred.

The bright red symbol on Gideon's chest filled her vision.

Rune's lungs were about to burst. Soon, nothing would matter, because she'd be dead.

Her fingertips brushed metal.

Hope flared as her hand gripped the pistol.

One shot. Make it count.

Rune lifted the gun and fired.

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EIGHT

RUNE

THE BANG RANG IN her ears.

Gideon's hands loosened from around her throat as he stumbled back, staring in horror. Behind him, Ava dropped to the floor. Dead from the bullet in her brain.

The only sound in the room was Rune's and Gideon's uneven breaths.

Rune shook out her hand, which stung from the force of the pistol's release, then lowered her gaze to the spellmark on Gideon's chest. She'd nearly shot him. But at the last second, she had recognized the symbol.

Binder. A spell that bound its victim to a witch's command.

It was a calculated guess, but considering Gideon's hands were no longer locked around her neck, a correct one. Which meant Gideon hadn't necessarily wanted to strangle her; he'd simply had no choice.

If Ava had cast *Everlasting* alongside *Binder*, the spell would have held despite Rune's killing shot, and it would be Rune dead on the floor. But Ava hadn't expected to die. She'd had no need of *Everlasting*—an enchantment that kept a spell intact beyond the death of the witch who cast it.

Seraphine had taught Rune many things since they'd escaped the New Republic, and this was one of them.

"Don't make any sudden moves," she said, gun pointed at Gideon's chest, where the blood-red symbol still blazed. With Ava dead, Gideon was free to go back to trying to kill Rune. This time of his own free will.

Except ...

Rune glanced at the sink. Had Gideon intentionally thrust her against the mirror directly beside it? Had he *wanted* her to reach for his pistol, to shoot Ava and sever the spell?

Her mind swarmed with too many thoughts at once.

“Don’t think I won’t shoot you, too,” she said, still aiming the gun at him.

Rune hoped she sounded confident. She’d never fired a gun before today and had hit Ava by sheer luck.

Gideon looked from her to his pistol, his eyes inscrutable.

“The barrel’s empty. You need to reload.”

Is he messing with me?

“Go ahead.” He nodded. “Fire away.”

“You think I won’t?”

He smirked.

Rune narrowed her eyes. Fine. She would call his bluff.

Lowering the gun a few inches so she'd wound him, not kill him—or so she hoped—Rune pulled the trigger.

The pistol clicked but didn't discharge.

She pulled again, but no bullet fired.

Ugh! Who infiltrates a heavily fortified palace with only one bullet in their gun?

Throwing down the pistol, Rune grabbed the casting knife strapped to her thigh and held it out in front of her, making it clear she was still armed and he better not try anything.

Gideon glanced at Ava's body on the floor, unconcerned. "Someone will have heard that."

Rune crossed the room to the door. "Which is only one of *many* reasons we need to get out of here."

Cracking it open, she glanced out into the hall.

The sight of distant guards running straight for them made her quickly pull it shut again.

“They’re already on their way.”

With no way out, her only option was to use her invisibility spell, *Ghost Walker*. But doing so would leave her Crimson Moth signature behind—letting everyone know Rune was responsible for this.

Unless I conceal it.

Rune scanned the powder room, fixing on the door of a small closet.

Pointing to it, she said, “Get inside.”

Gideon, who was at the sink washing the blood off himself, looked to the closet. Then back to Rune. His eyes were doubtful.

“Not the best plan you’ve ever come up with.”

He must have buttoned his trousers when her back was turned.

“I can’t cast a spell out in the open.” She walked toward the blood pooling around Ava’s body. “Cressida will see my signature and know I helped you. I need somewhere to hide it.”

He stepped away from the sink, shaking his head. “You’re not putting a spell on me.”

“It’s only a Minora,” said Rune, scooping Ava’s blood into her cupped palm.

Gideon took another step back. “I’ve already been subjugated by *two* spells tonight.”

Rune rose to face him. “If I don’t—”

Shouts from the hall interrupted her.

The guards were almost here.

“Listen,” she hissed. “I’m perfectly happy to save myself and abandon you. But if you want to live, I suggest you let me do this.”

Gideon glanced toward the door and back to the blood dripping from Rune's fingers. Instead of answering, he walked to the closet, opened the door, and got in.

"There's not enough room in here for two people."

"Then *make* room." Sheathing her knife, she followed him in, careful not to leave a trail of blood in her wake.

Gideon was right. There wasn't enough room for two people.

Shelves lined the tiny closet, each one full of towels, soap, and cleaning supplies. That left only a few feet of space for Rune and Gideon to cram themselves into. Gideon took up most of it, forcing Rune to squeeze in between him and the shelves, leaving less than an inch of air between their two bodies.

Sweet Mercy. She'd forgotten how *large* he was. Like a mountain.

The closet door stood open, letting light from the room beyond flood in. Before she ran out of time, Rune used Ava's blood to draw three symbols across Gideon's freshly cleaned chest.

"Just so we're clear," she whispered, using the last of the blood on the final symbol, "I'm doing this for Alex, not you." Under her breath, she added, "He'd never forgive me if I let her hurt you."

When she glanced up, Gideon was staring at the ring on her finger. The one Alex gave her when he proposed.

“Understood,” he said, glancing away.

With the spell finished, magic burned in Rune’s throat. It flowed out of her and around him. Gideon shimmered like a mirage and would have vanished from her sight entirely if not for Rune knowing precisely where he was.

Ghost Walker wasn’t a true invisibility spell. Instead, it coaxed the gazes of others to bounce off you, allowing you to evade notice. But if someone knew you were there, the spell couldn’t hide you.

THUD THUD THUD.

Rune jumped.

“Everything all right in there?”

She glanced toward Ava’s body across the room. She still needed to draw the spellmarks on herself, but she’d used all of Ava’s blood on Gideon.

THUD! THUD! THUD!

“Who’s in there?” demanded the guard.

Gideon grabbed the closet door and shut it, plunging them into darkness. Slivers of light filtered in from the cracks.

“Here.” He thrust out his hand. “Use mine.”

Rune glanced down to find blood shining on his palm, seeping from what appeared to be dozens of tiny cuts. When he held his hand up to the light filtering in, Rune saw shards of sparkling glass embedded in the skin.

He needed to dig those out before the cuts got infected.

“Better hurry,” he whispered, as the door to the powder room burst open and guards flooded in.

Out of time, Rune touched the blood on Gideon’s palm and quickly drew the same three symbols on her wrist. Her fingers trembled as she rushed. If she got even one mark wrong, the spell wouldn’t work. But if she didn’t finish in time ...

The briny taste of magic prickled her tongue. A second later, Rune's skin tingled as magic flowed out and around her, hiding her the same way it had Gideon.

She glanced up to find two iridescent moths flickering a few feet over their heads. Burning red in the darkness.

She'd barely finished the spell when footsteps headed in their direction. As if on instinct, Gideon's arm slid around her waist, pulling her hips against his, moving her away from the closet door.

Heat poured off him. His scent filled the closet—woody, with a hint of gunpowder. Fire raced through her as old memories surfaced: reverent glances; whispered promises; the feel of his hands and mouth and body on hers, skin to skin.

How what once lay between them was a potent kind of magic ...

Warning bells chimed in her head.

It was a lie. She fought the memories down, locking them away. *Every second of it.*

The closet door swung open. A soldier poked his head in.

Glancing around, the man looked straight at Rune and Gideon ... and away. The spell did its job, repelling his gaze away from them.

He didn't bother looking up. Why would he? It was an empty closet.

If he had looked, he'd have sighted the two crimson moths burning like flames in the air overhead.

"Nothing here!" he called out, withdrawing.

Gideon's grip on her relaxed. Rune released a breath, pulling slightly away. Reinstating that inch of space between them.

The closet door hung open.

It's now or never.

Rune needed to get them to the stables, put Gideon on a horse, and send him on his way. Grabbing the belt loop of his trousers, Rune exited the closet, tugging him after her.

“What happened here?” A sharp voice cut through the clamor of the guards.

Rune and Gideon halted.

Cressida strode toward Ava’s corpse, her eyes narrowing as she stopped to take in the bullet wound and the blood. Bending down, she picked up Gideon’s pistol, staring at it.

Her cool gaze lifted. Fear sparked through Rune, who didn’t know if her spells were strong enough to withstand Cressida’s detection. They were only Minoras. And Cressida was a far more powerful witch.

Cressida scanned the room, moving past the open closet before pausing at the space where Rune and Gideon stood.

Rune’s grip tightened on Gideon’s belt loop.

But as Cressida rose to her feet, Soren entered the room. “Dear god.” At the sight of Ava, his face went pale. “What happened?”

“Our prisoner escaped,” said Cressida, turning toward the prince and away from Rune and Gideon.

Rune relaxed. Cloaked by her spell, she crossed the room with Gideon in tow. When they reached the open powder room door, Cressida walked over to the closet. “You said Rune is locked in your bedroom, yes?”

Gideon stepped into the hall, and Rune glanced back to see Cressida peer inside the closet ... then glance up.

No.

Soren nodded. “I posted four guards at the door. No one’s getting in there.”

When Cressida turned back, her eyes were blue flames. “Perhaps we should make sure.”

She knows.

Soren shook his head. “I assure you, Rune is—”

Cressida cut him off. “Gideon Sharpe came here to assassinate Rune Winters. He is now roaming the palace. Best to be sure he hasn’t found her, don’t you think?”

Rune's heart faltered. If they went to Soren's bedroom and found her missing ...

Cressida strode straight past her, into the hall. The prince followed.

Panic hummed in Rune's blood. Those casting signatures damned her.

Unless ...

If Rune returned to Soren's locked bedroom before Cressida arrived, it might make her doubt what she'd seen. After all, Rune might have cast a few spells upon first setting foot in the powder room. There were a multitude for enhancing looks. Spells to fix your hair or makeup. Spells to get rid of puffy eyes or splotchy skin from crying. Rune might have gone there precisely to cast such spells. To keep Soren charmed.

How long before they find his bedroom empty?

The prince's chambers were across the palace, on the second floor. Rune and Gideon were on the main floor.

Three minutes. Probably less.

It wasn't enough time. Even if she got to Soren's bedroom before Cressida, there were still a locked door and four guards to contend with. Rune would have to cast another spell to unlock it. And *that* would solidify Cressida's suspicion, sealing Rune's fate.

It was hopeless.

There was no way to get back into that room in time.

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NINE

GIDEON

GIDEON COULDN'T HELP BUT notice how different Rune's spell was from Cressida's and Ava's. The latter had used powerful binding spells, meant to force and humiliate him. But Rune's was so subtle, he barely sensed it.

It didn't control him, nor did it control others. It seemed to merely *suggest* that people turn away from him, look past him, or ignore him altogether. It was almost ... gentle.

“You’ll find the stable entrance in the east wing of Larkmont,” said Rune. For some reason, he could still see her. Why the spell didn’t affect him, he wasn’t sure. “My horse is the chestnut mare. Take her and get far away from here.”

He sensed the wrongness in her voice, which was strung tight as a bow.

“Where will you go?”

“I need to be in Soren’s bedroom,” she said. “Preferably before Cressida gets there. But the door is locked, and four of Soren’s men are standing guard, so I can’t get back in. If she finds me missing...”

She’ll know Rune helped him.

Why did she help me?

He recalled her words in the closet.

I’m doing this for Alex, not you. He’d never forgive me if I let her hurt you.

Right. Alex.

The one who would have been Rune's husband by now, if Cressida hadn't shot him. Alex's ring was on her finger, making one thing perfectly clear:

She's still in love with my brother.

Why else would she save Gideon—a man who'd tried to kill her tonight?

"How did you escape the bedroom?" he asked, to distract himself from this fact.

"I dropped from the balcony."

"Can you climb back up?"

She shook her head, her pace quickening as she turned a corner. The marble statues lining this hall seemed to watch them as they passed, unaffected by Rune's spell.

"The walls are sheer stone." She glanced at him. "Don't worry about me. I'll figure something out. Just get out of Larkmont before Cressida thinks to use a counterspell that will overpower mine."

“Can she do that?”

Rune didn’t answer.

Gideon blew out a breath. Raked a hand through his hair. Every moment he lingered here increased his chances of being caught again. But Rune had risked herself for him and was about to suffer the consequences. He couldn’t just leave her.

“Is the balcony low enough for me to lift you?”

Her footsteps slowed momentarily. “I ... don’t know.”

Gideon would help her—only this once—for Alex. And then he’d get himself to safety, where he would regroup.

This was only a *temporary* setback.

“Show me.”

RUNE LED HIM TO a garden at the heart of Soren's palace. The evening was humid and warm, and the crickets hummed a low, insistent chorus. Stone walls enclosed the garden's four sides, and balconies protruded from the second level.

Gideon guessed these were Soren's private quarters.

"Which one is it?"

Standing in a patch of yellow dahlias, Rune pointed to the balcony overhead. Lamplight flooded out, drenching her in a warm glow. In that golden dress—which Gideon had to remind himself he despised—she looked like a burning flame.

He suddenly noticed her swollen lips.

Gideon frowned. Were they swollen when he first cornered her in the powder room?

No. He'd been so close to her, it would have been impossible not to notice.

Worse than her lips were the bruises on her neck. They weren't bruises from Gideon's hands. These were from a mouth.

Soren's mouth.

Gideon's jaw clenched. He glanced from her to the prince's balcony overhead. "Do you stay in his bedroom often?"

Rune studied the same balcony. "I don't see how that's any of your concern."

She was right. He couldn't care less whose bed she kept warm at night. Gideon was here to pay back a debt, nothing more. If he were delivering her straight into another man's arms, so be it.

She meant nothing to him.

Just as he meant nothing to her.

So why couldn't he keep his stupid mouth shut?

"You've outdone yourself this time. Seducing a prince."

Rune ignored him.

“As his wife, you’ll have fancier balls, fancier friends, and fancier wardrobes than you’ve ever dreamed of.”

“Jealous?” said Rune, studying the walls. “If you wanted to marry me, Gideon, you should have said so.”

Gideon heard the taunt in her voice.

As if she’d stoop so low.

“Marry *you*?” he said, playing along. “The girl who plans to help Cressida resurrect her sisters and reinstate a Reign of Witches? No, thank you.”

Rune’s gaze shot to his face. “What?”

“Cressida told me all about it: she intends to raise Analise and Elowyn from the dead. It will be everything you witches want: psychotic murderers back in charge.”

“Last time I checked, the psychotic murderers *were* in charge.” Rune turned toward him, frowning hard. “Are you saying Cressida told you she’s planning a resurrection?”

She seemed genuinely surprised. But Gideon knew Rune to be an expert liar.

“Are you denying any knowledge of it?” He studied her, trying to determine the truth.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it.” She continued scanning the walls. “Anyway, it’s not possible. Resurrection spells require an exchange of life for life. The life of a family member must be taken to give life back to the dead. Cressida has no family left. She’s the last living Roseblood.”

“She seems to think otherwise.”

“Then she’s mad,” said Rune, wading deeper into the dahlias beneath Soren’s balcony. Apparently finished with this conversation. “Or she was trying to torment you.”

Maybe.

They were running out of time, so Gideon kept his doubts to himself. He scanned the walls, searching for a way up. But she was right: the stones were perfectly smooth. There was nothing to climb.

The balcony, however, was low enough for him to lift her.

He strode over to where she stood in the flowers. Crouching, he cupped his hands and held them out.

“Hold on to me.”

Rune studied him, as if deciding whether she trusted him to lift her. But soon enough, her hands came down on his shoulders, gripping firmly. Gideon cupped her calf through the silk of her dress, guiding her foot into his waiting palm.

“Let’s get one thing clear,” she said, as he rose. “If our paths cross again, I won’t show you mercy a second time.”

Rune’s grip tightened on him as she lost, then regained, her balance.

“Good,” he said, pushing her higher, muscles straining beneath her weight. “Because the next time my gun is to your head, I *will* pull the trigger.”

“*Perfect*,” she said, stepping onto his shoulders as she reached for the balcony overhead. “I’m glad we understand each other.”

She made a little sound, like a grunt, and the weight of her eased from his shoulders. She'd grabbed hold of an iron bar holding up the balcony's balustrade and was using it to haul herself up.

And then she was gone.

Gideon backed away in time to see the balcony doors close and the lamplight disappear, leaving him alone with the crickets and the dahlias.

What did I deliver her into?

It was none of his business. If Rune had wanted to make a different choice, she would have.

Gideon needed to stop *feeling*. They were at war—or soon would be. Gideon couldn't be flesh and blood; he needed to be gunpowder and steel. Impenetrable. Unyielding.

Turning his back on the doors she'd disappeared through, Gideon strode out of the gardens, and then out of Larkmont.

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TEN

RUNE

GOOD RIDDANCE, GIDEON SHARPE.

It was stupid enough saving him once, when he'd come here to end her life. If he tried to kill her again, she would let Cressida have him.

At the sound of voices in the hall, Rune quickly dived into the bed. The sheets were already turned down, waiting for her.

There was no time to strip off her soiled dress and hide it. No time to scrub the blood from her hands.

There was only enough time to smudge the spellmarks on her wrist, dissolving *Ghost Walker*.

Rune had barely pulled up the covers and closed her eyes when the door swung open.

“See?” she heard Soren say, his footsteps padding toward the bed. Rune kept her eyes closed, feigning sleep, as the prince brushed strands of hair off her face. “She’s safe.”

Soren turned to give his guards orders. “Bar Larkmont’s exits. Make sure not a living soul leaves the palace.” His voice grew fainter as he walked into the hall. “I want him found.”

Thinking it safe, Rune nearly opened her eyes, but the sound of footsteps stopped her.

The air turned chilly as a shadow slid over her. Winter-cold. Rune kept her eyes closed and her body still. She willed her racing heart to slow, fearing Cressida heard every frantic beat.

The witch queen leaned down, her breath rushing against Rune’s cheek.

“I know what you did.”

Rune’s heart pounded faster.

She saw my casting signatures.

Rune could say those signatures were from cosmetic spells. Cressida would have to take her at her word, to keep the peace with Soren. But Cressida had seen Rune deceive and pretend as the Crimson Moth. She knew what Rune was capable of.

Deep down, she knew the truth.

Is she here to take her revenge? Or will she wait?

Even if Rune wanted to open her eyes and run, fear flooded her limbs, turning them to stone.

A predator stood over her. If she moved, that predator would strike.

“Do you really think you can outwit *me*?” Cressida’s voice was like a snakebite, flooding Rune with poison. “He’s mine, Rune. If you defy me again—”

“Is everything all right?”

Someone had entered the room. Rune felt Cressida straighten and turn, facing the intruder.

“How is she?” Seraphine’s voice was like sunshine, thawing Rune’s frozen limbs. “I heard about Ava. Horrible. Is Rune all right?”

At the presence of her friend, Rune was tempted to open her eyes. But she remained as she was.

“I’ll stay with Rune,” said Seraphine. “I promised Prince Soren I’d ward the doors and windows of this room, to ensure she’s safe.”

“How kind.” Cressida’s voice was hard as cut glass.

“There’s still a chance you can catch your witch hunter.” Seraphine’s voice was equally hard. “I’m sure you’ll want to try.”

A tense silence hung in the air. Cressida wanted to punish Rune for her disobedience, but she wanted to catch Gideon more. And the longer she wasted time here, the likelier he was to slip away.

Seconds later, Cressida’s shadow receded.

When the door swung shut behind her and her footsteps retreated into the hall, Rune let out a breath, opened her eyes, and sat up.

Seraphine stood across the room, hands planted on her small hips. As Rune flung off the covers and swung her legs out, Seraphine's hands fell to her sides, her gaze sweeping down Rune.

"What have you *done*?"

Rune glanced at herself. The golden dress was ruined, and blood smeared her fingers.

"Ava tried to kill me," she said, putting her feet on the ground. "I had no choice. I had to shoot her."

"*You* shot Ava? I thought the witch hunter killed her." Seraphine shook her head, sending her dark curls bouncing. She blew out an aggravated breath. "Oh, Rune. Why were you even in that room?"

Rune didn't answer. Just stood up and stripped off the bloodstained dress, throwing it into the fire crackling in the hearth. She watched the flames eat the fabric, destroying the evidence of her crime. After searching through Soren's armoire, she found a long-sleeved shirt and pulled it over her head.

Seraphine drew closer. "Where is he?"

“Gideon? I don’t know.” Rune strode into the adjoining bathroom. *Long gone, I hope.*

“Soren said he came here to kill you,” said Seraphine, following her in.

At the sink, Rune turned on the tap and thrust her hands beneath the cold water. “He did.”

Seraphine threw up her hands. “Then why save him?”

As Rune scrubbed the blood off herself, her thoughts trailed back to the powder room and the scream she’d heard from behind the closed door. Gideon’s torn shirt on the floor. The undone buttons of his trousers.

She might not know exactly what Cressida had done to make him scream, but she knew what the witch queen had been *about* to do.

“No one deserves a fate like that,” she whispered, staring at the bloody water swirling down the drain.

Not even her worst enemy.

She intends to raise Analise and Elowyn from the dead. Gideon's voice rumbled through her.

It scared Rune more than she'd let on in the garden.

Queen Raine had outlawed resurrection spells centuries ago. But Cressida wouldn't care about that.

Still, Rune wanted to doubt it was possible; Analise and Elowyn were long dead, and resurrection spells required the sacrifice of someone closely related to the deceased—like a parent, sibling, or child.

Without direct kin to sacrifice, the spell wouldn't work. The only living Roseblood was Cressida herself.

She seems to think otherwise, Gideon had said.

Could it be true? Was there another living Roseblood?

And how could Rune put Cressida on the throne, after tonight? *Knowing* what she would have done to Gideon?

It wasn't the first time she'd asked herself this question.

The answer was always the same: if she didn't, Gideon—or some other witch hunter—would come for her again.

The next time my gun is to your head, I will pull the trigger.

His words were a reminder: *They will never stop hunting us.*

Gideon wouldn't return to the New Republic empty-handed. Not when a bullet in Rune's head would deprive the witch queen of an army. He was probably regrouping at this very moment, waiting for his next chance to assassinate her.

It was why the alternative to Cressida was worse. The alternative to Cressida was witches being slaughtered until there were no witches left. The only way to stop the Blood Guard was to put Cressida on the throne.

Gideon can take care of himself.

If Cressida conquered the New Republic, Gideon was more than capable of fleeing the island and never looking back. Whether he had the good sense to wasn't Rune's concern.

Rune had no reason to care what happened to him or any other patriot once Cressida returned to power. How many of them had informed on girls like her? Cheered as innocent witches were butchered in the street? Had done the butchering themselves?

They deserved what was coming for them.

But isn't that what they said about us?

Rune shook off the question.

"If Cressida suspects you helped him escape," said Seraphine, "it's only a matter of time before she punishes you for it."

Finished washing blood off her hands, Rune turned off the taps, staring into the sink, trying to think.

"You need to get far away from here, Rune."

She glanced up to see Seraphine lift her fingers to a scar near the base of her neck, tracing the raised lines. It was a habit Rune had witnessed dozens of times in their spell casting lessons. It meant she was concentrating hard on something.

Seraphine's clothing normally hid the casting scar's shape. But the thin straps of her evening gown left it exposed tonight. Rune recognized the form of a bird, shining like silver against Seraphine's brown skin.

It was the same bird as in Rune's grandmother's seal. The one Nan used to stamp her letters with.

A kestrel.

"If I run away," said Rune, turning to her, "this alliance will crumble."

Seraphine stopped tracing and dropped her hand. "So?"

So, who would save the witches they'd left behind?

There were still girls being hunted down like animals in the New Republic. There was still a sibyl in Blood Guard custody, being blackmailed into helping them unmask her own kind. Rune couldn't abandon them.

Alex would say that she could. That she *should*. That Rune had done more than enough to save witches from the purge.

But Alex wasn't here.

Rune was adrift without him—the boy who'd cherished her. Alex would never help her with another heist, or protect her with another alibi.

But neither was he here telling her to *stop*; to keep her head down and not risk herself for others.

She was free to be who she wanted.

There was no one holding her back.

If I rescue the sibyl, she told herself, the Blood Guard can't learn where other witches are hiding.

She couldn't protect them the way Cressida could—permanently, by seizing power. But she could protect them for now.

If there is a missing Roseblood heir, I can find them before Cressida does and keep them from danger, too.

Rune knew the summoning spell required to find a missing person. It needed to be performed in an ancient location, and the only one she knew of was a ring of summoning stones back on the island.

“Rune,” said Seraphine, stepping toward her. “Buy passage aboard a ship and take it to the other side of the world. Hide yourself somewhere she’ll never find you. Run and don’t look back.”

Rune had a better idea.

A plan was forming in her mind. A dangerous one.

“*Rune.*” Seraphine’s hands gripped her shoulders. “Promise me you’ll run.”

“Okay,” she said. “I promise. I’ll run.”

As soon as I complete one last mission ...