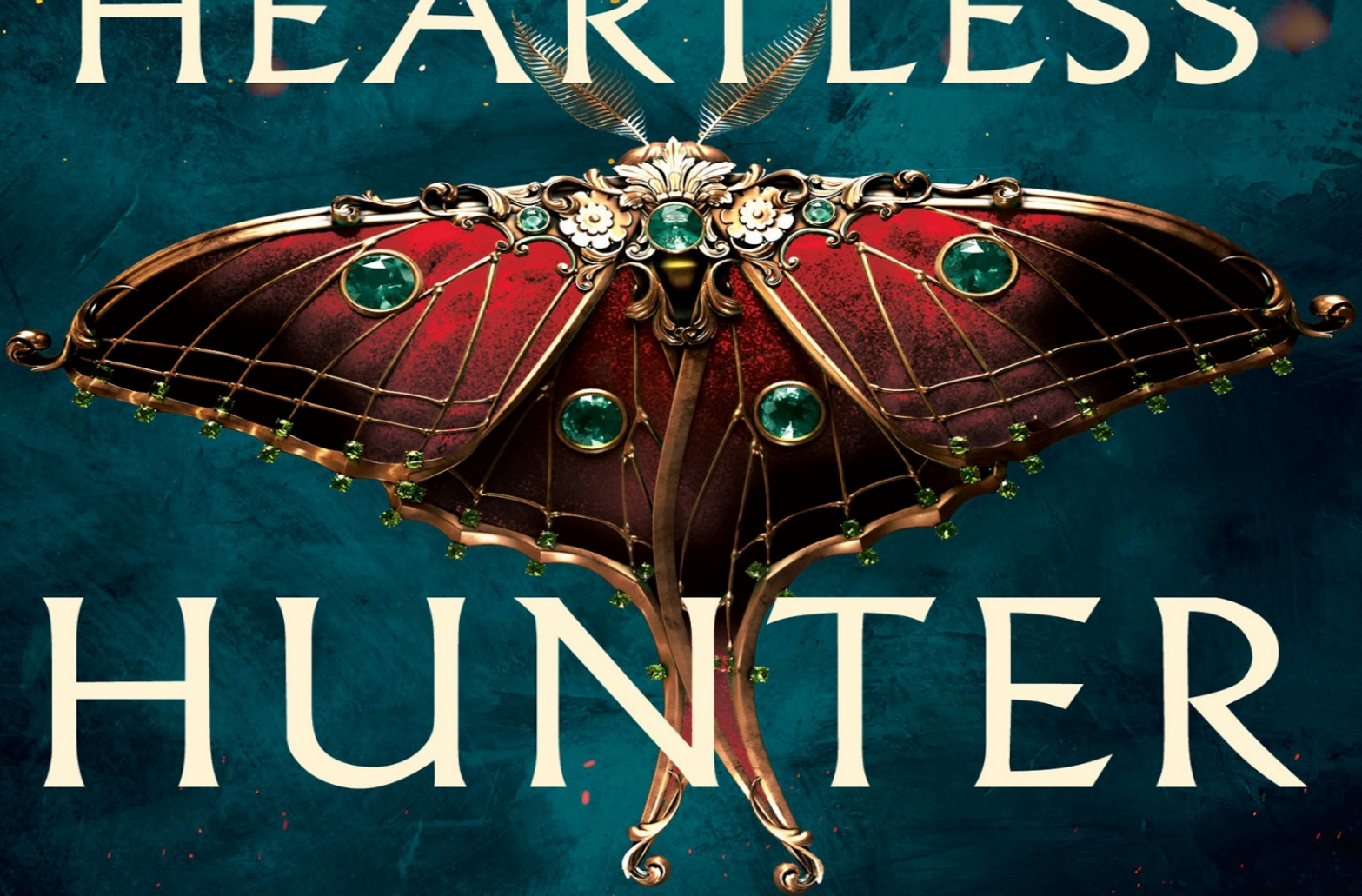


HER DEADLIEST ENEMY
OR HER GREATEST LOVE?

HEARTLESS



HUNTER

THE CRIMSON MOTH: BOOK ONE

KRISTEN
CICCARELLI

HEARTLESS HUNTER

KRISTEN
CICCARELLI



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK



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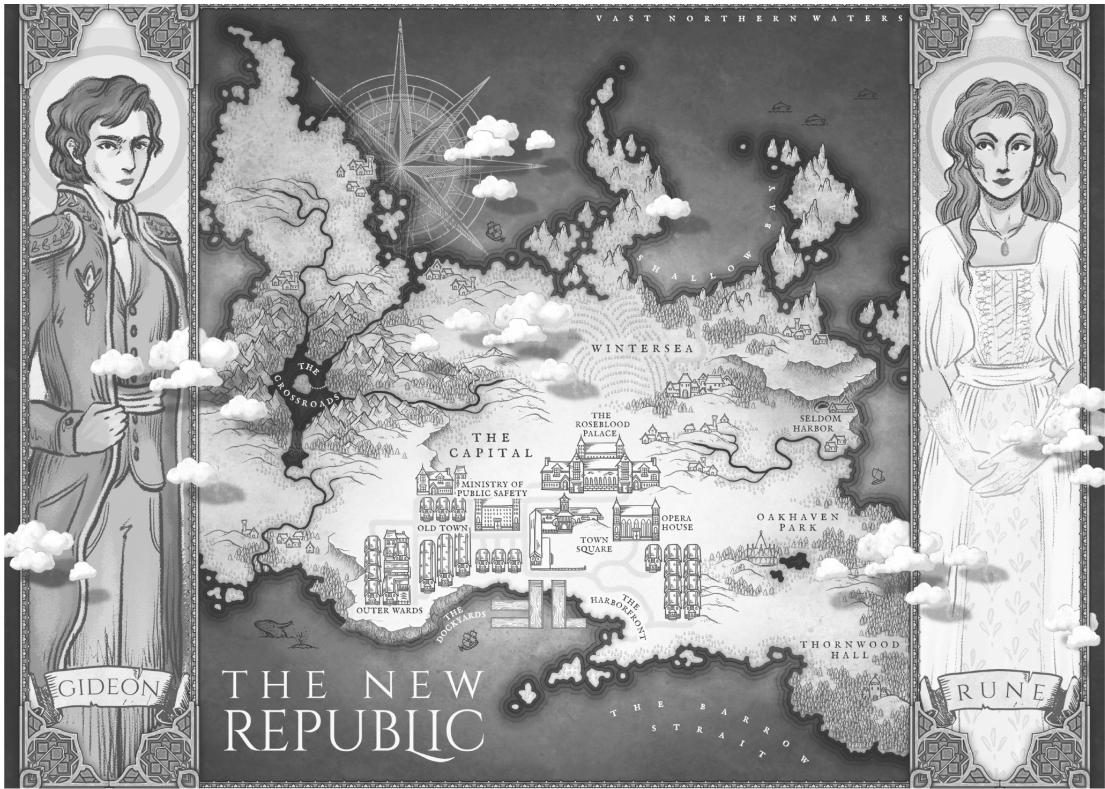
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**FOR THOSE AFRAID TO BE
WHO THEY ARE**

Comrades! Only through the death of the old world can we prevent the return of evil. We must destroy these witches and snuff out their magic. Everything is permitted for the sake of this higher aim: freedom from their oppression.

Let their blood stain the streets forever.

—NICOLAS CREED, YOUR GOOD COMMANDER



OVERTURE

WHEN THE BLOOD GUARD suspected a girl of being a witch, they stripped off her clothes and searched her body for scars.

During the Sister Queens' rule, witches wore their casting scars with pride, putting their power on display like jeweled rings and silk garments. Scars signaled wealth and rank, and most of all, *magic*.

Now they marked the hunted.

The last time Rune laid eyes on a witch's scars was two years ago, after the witch queens were murdered in their beds and the blood of their council flowed in the streets. The Blood Guard seized control of the city, and the purgings began.

It was sunset when a surging crowd gathered at the center of the fog-soaked city. Rune stood among them, unable to unsee the thirsty, fevered looks around her. The people wanted vengeance. Wanted to gulp it down like a rich red wine.

The gulls shrieked overhead as the old witch stumbled up the steps to the purging platform. Unlike those who came after her, the crone neither wept nor begged for mercy, but met her fate with a stoic glare. The Blood Guard ripped one sleeve from her shirt, revealing the evidence of her crimes: patterned scars flowing down her left arm, etched like delicate white lacework against her golden skin.

Rune couldn't help but find them beautiful. Once a sign of superior status, the scars were now impossible to hide, making the old woman easy prey for witch hunters.

It was why Rune never cut herself.

She couldn't afford to let them find the scars.

ONE

RUNE

MIRAGE: (n.) the lowest and most basic category of spell.

Mirage Spells are simple illusions held for short periods that require little blood. The fresher the blood, the stronger the magic, and the easier casting will be.

—From Rules of Magic by Queen Callidora the Valiant

LIGHTNING SNAKED ACROSS THE sky as Rune Winters made her way through the wet forest, barely sheltered from the rain by the pine canopy overhead. Her lantern's glow lit the path before her, its surface broken by twisted roots and pools of rainwater.

It was a terrible night for casting. The rain seeped through her cloak, the dampness loosening the spellmarks she'd drawn on her wrist in blood. She needed to redraw the symbols before the rain washed them away entirely, taking her magic with them.

The illusion disguising Rune had to hold until she knew for certain Seraphine wouldn't kill her.

As a former advisor to the Sister Queens, Seraphine Oakes was a powerful witch. And after two years of searching, Rune had finally tracked her down. Now that she had, what would she find at the top of this wooded headland—friend or foe?

Rune worried her lip with her teeth as she remembered her grandmother's last words to her, two years ago.

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

After the Blood Guard arrested Nan and dragged her from the house, they smeared a bloody X across the front door, declaring to everyone that an

enemy of the Republic had been found within and was on her way to be purged.

The memory of that day stabbed like a knife.

An anxious hum buzzed in Rune's blood as she continued onward. Like an overture, growing louder and faster. If Seraphine saw through the illusion cloaking Rune before hearing her out, she might expel Rune from her house—or worse, strike her dead.

Because wherever Rune Winters went, her carefully crafted reputation came with her.

She was an informer. A witch hater. A darling of the New Republic.

Rune was the girl who betrayed her grandmother.

It's why she'd disguised herself as an old peddler tonight, leading a mule laden with goods. The smell of wet donkey hung in the air, and her load of pots and pans clattered with the beast's every step—each detail summoned into being by the magic in Rune's blood and held together by the symbols drawn on her wrist, binding the spell to her.

It was a Mirage—the most basic of spell classifications—and yet it had taken all of Rune's mental energy to cast. The resulting headache still roared in her temples.

The branches shook with rain. Lightning flashed overhead, illuminating the tiny cottage perched at the cliff's edge where the forest ended. The windows glowed warmly with lamplight, and Rune could smell the woodsmoke pluming from the chimney.

With her spellmarks fading fast, the illusion flickered around her. She needed the spell to hold for a little longer.

Setting down her lantern, Rune withdrew the glass vial hidden in her pocket and uncorked the lid. Dabbing the blood inside the vial onto her fingertip, she held her wrist to the lamplight and retraced the symbols, reinforcing them. One altered her appearance—graying her hair, wrinkling her skin, hunching her shoulders—while the other summoned the manifestation of the mule beside her.

The second she finished, the spell roared in her ears and the taste of salt bloomed on her tongue. The illusion snapped back into place, its bindings to Rune strengthened, and the pain in her temples throbbed harder. Swallowing the briny tang of magic, she pulled her hood over her hair, gritting her teeth

against the worsening headache, then picked up her lantern and stepped out of the woods, continuing down the path toward the house.

Mud sucked at her boots. Rain pelted her face.

Her heart felt like it was going to thump right out of her chest.

Whatever happened when that door opened was now in the hands of the Ancients. If Seraphine saw through her magic and cursed her dead, it would be no less than Rune deserved. And if she showed mercy ...

Rune bit her lip, trying not to hope.

Moving through the yard, she heard the anxious whinny of a horse from the silhouetted stable. Probably frightened by the storm. When she reached the house, she found the front door already open and a triangle of golden light spilling into the yard.

Her stiff fingers curled against the brass ring of her lantern's handle. Was Seraphine expecting her?

Some witches foresaw snatches of the future—though these days it was a rare, often fickle ability. Nothing like the clear-sighted prophecies of the powerful sibyls of old. Perhaps Seraphine was one of these.

The thought made Rune straighten her shoulders and force herself onward. If Seraphine had foreseen this meeting, she knew who Rune was and that she was coming.

All the more reason to get this over with.

Leaving the mule illusion behind in the yard, she stepped across the threshold of the house. No one stood waiting for her. A fire lay dying in the hearth, the embers flickering red, and a plate of food sat on the table, the gravy congealed as if it had been sitting for a while. The rain spitting in through the open door dampened the stone floor beneath her feet.

Rune frowned. "Hello?"

Silence answered her.

"Seraphine?"

The house moaned at the sound of its owner's name: the beams creaking overhead and walls shifting in the wind. Rune glanced around, looking for any sign of the woman who lived here. The tiny house contained only a single room, with a kitchen in one corner and a small study in the opposite.

"You must be here somewhere ..."

A roughly hewn ladder in the center of the room led to a loft. Stepping onto its rungs, Rune climbed to the top, where she found an unmade bed and three lit candles dribbling honey-colored wax onto the floorboards. She climbed down and checked the door at the back of the house, which led into an empty garden.

There was no sign of Seraphine.

Rune's skin prickled with unease.

Where is she?

The horse whinnied again in the distance.

The stable. Of course. If the creature had spooked, Seraphine would have gone to calm it.

With her lantern in hand and her headache still pulsing in her skull, Rune stepped back across the threshold and into the rain, leaving the door ajar, collecting her mule illusion as she went. Rain splattered her wrist, and the spell lurched around her, trying to hold. Hurrying, she was halfway to the stable when something squished beneath her boot. It was difficult to see in the dark and the storm, so she crouched low and set her lamp in the muck.

It was a garment.

Rune reached for the sodden fabric. Rising to her feet, she studied her findings in the lamplight: a plain, woolen work dress. The kind a servant might wear while scrubbing floors.

Except someone had sliced the back open.

Why would ...

She glanced at the path and saw a second piece of clothing. Stooping, she discovered a cotton shift, brown with mud. Also sliced down the back. *No*, thought Rune, her rain-bitten fingers tracing the frayed edges. *Not cut.*

Torn.

Her stomach tightened.

With her wrist so exposed to the elements, the rain smudged out her spellmarks completely, and the illusion sloughed off. Her headache vanished with it. Before she could fix the marks, a sudden wind rose, growling like an angry wolf.

SLAM!

The door to Seraphine's house banged shut.

Rune dropped the woolen dress and spun to face the door, her breath catching in her throat. Closed, the door gave her a full view of the bloody X smeared from corner to corner across its wooden surface.

The mark of the Blood Guard.

Seraphine wasn't in the stable calming her horse. Soldiers had found her, stripped her, and taken her with them.

Nan's oldest friend was in the hands of the Blood Guard—the most dangerous place for a witch to be.