

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

FIFTEEN

RUNE

WHEN RUNE OPENED THE door to their cabin, she wondered if she'd made a grave error.

The room was as small as a dog's kennel. Wedged between the walls was a bed barely big enough to fit two people. Between the door and the bed frame was space to set down their suitcases, and little else.

There was no closet or dresser, and the only light came from a small window over the bed.

"I've died and gone to hell," said Gideon from behind her.

He dropped their luggage on the floor and shut the door. With two people in such a small space, the temperature was already rising. Standing, Rune untied the tassels of her cloak and tossed it onto the bed.

“It could be worse,” she said, defensive.

Though what *worse* looked like, she couldn’t imagine.

Rune almost heard Gideon’s growled thoughts as he scanned the room they’d be confined to for the next two nights.

Resigning himself, he peeled off his jacket—she’d immediately recognized the Sharpe Duet style when he showed up in her fitting room—and tossed it onto the bed. As he unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt, Rune noticed how smart he looked in his father’s suit. He’d tailored it to fit himself, and its classic look unexpectedly complemented her vintage-inspired dress.

We do pass as newlyweds.

Her stomach dipped. But before she could banish the odd feeling, a knocking came from down the hall. Gideon glanced toward the door, rolling up his second sleeve. At the urgent voices, Rune opened it and peeked out.

Uniformed officers walked the corridor, knocking on cabin doors and questioning the inhabitants.

Her pulse kicked.

“The police are here.”

There was only one way out of this corridor—the stairwell—and it was on the other side of the officers.

We’re cornered.

Before they spotted her, Rune shut the door and turned to Gideon. “Take off your clothes.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“A vintage suit would be easy for the shop matron to describe to the police,” she explained.

Seeming to agree, Gideon unbuttoned his shirt and nodded to her dress. “Won’t they also be looking for a girl in a stolen wedding gown?”

Rune glanced down at the dress she wore. It would give her away in an instant.

As Gideon shucked off his shirt, Rune reached for the laces at the back of the dress. The shop matron had helped her into it and tied the laces tight. Now, the harder she tugged on them, the tighter they knotted.

The knocking got louder.

Closer.

Rune glanced at Gideon, who was shirtless and working at the buttons of his pants. “Um ... Gideon?”

He turned to face her, giving her a view of his very defined abdomen.

Rune spun, pointing to the laces at the back of her dress.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said.

Gideon stalked toward her. Which, with three feet of space to move in, only required half a step.

“Trust me,” she said through gritted teeth. “I’d rather not have to ask you for help.”

“Trust me,” he growled back, “I’d rather not have to give it.”

Gideon picked at the knots until one came loose. Then he *yanked*, jerking Rune with him. She had to press her hands flat against the clapboard wall and lean into them to stop herself from flopping around like a rag doll as he tugged and pulled.

“Next time,” he said, hauling at the laces, “you’re going to tell me the entire plan *up front*.”

Rune scowled at the wall. “If I’d told you the entire plan up front, you wouldn’t have agreed to it.”

“Exactly,” he said, his growing irritation evident in his roughness.

“That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

The laces loosened as he moved downward, baring her skin to him. Exposing her back to his gaze, from her shoulders to her hips.

Realizing it, Rune went hot all over.

“If you’d told me, we wouldn’t be in this—”

Before he could tug the dress off, the knocking arrived at their door.

“What do you want?” he roared, transferring his anger from Rune to whoever was knocking.

“Police! Open up!”

They both froze.

Rune nodded for him to answer it. He hesitated, then finally went as she wriggled free from the dress. Dropping it and his jacket on the ground, she kicked both pieces of clothing under the bed.

Rune needed to illusion herself, and fast.

Gideon swung the door open, angling it to hide Rune, who now stood in her underwear.

Unsheathing the knife at her thigh, she pressed its honed edge to her calf, where a multitude of silvery casting scars shone, carefully fashioned into the image of moths in flight. The moths started at her ankle and fluttered up the back of her leg.

Rune added a cut to the newest half-formed moth.

“Yes?” Unfettered annoyance dripped from Gideon’s voice.

Rune pressed her fingers to the blood welling up.

“S-sorry to disturb you, sir,” came a woman’s voice.

Rune didn’t envy her. The sight of Gideon shirtless was enough to stun any woman.

She drew the Mirage’s spellmark on her ankle in blood.

“Are you the Sharpes?”

The name clanged like a discordant bell in Rune’s ears. *The Sharpes*. It’s who she and Alex would have been. To hear it referring to her and Gideon ...

“That’s right,” said Gideon. “What do you want?”

Finally, the tang of magic burst on her tongue as the illusion took hold. She hoped it was enough.

“We have some questions for you.”

Knowing she needed to make an appearance, Rune called out: “Who’s there, pumpkin?”

She could almost feel Gideon wither beneath the pet name.

“No one important, *sugarplum*.” There was an edge to his voice. Like a wolf’s warning growl. He turned his attention back to the police. “As you can see, we’re a little busy. I’m sure you understand.”

He started to close the door, but an officer stepped forward, stopping it from shutting.

“This will only take a minute.”

Standing in only her underwear, Rune glanced at her suitcase. Was there enough time to find something to throw on? She was about to try when the officer pushed the door open wider, searching for Mrs. Sharpe.

Drat.

Her crimson moth signature flared in the air, directly in front of her.

Double drat.

She quickly stepped in front of it, hiding evidence of the spell.

Through the open door, her eyes met the officer's. She watched his gaze drop, running slowly down her body. As if he had every right to look.

White-hot anger flared in her chest. But there was nothing Rune could do. In this moment, she was at his mercy. They both were.

Suddenly, Gideon stepped between them, blocking Rune from the officer's gaze. Grabbing the shirt he'd discarded a few minutes ago, he gently pulled it down over her head. Startled, Rune pushed her arms through the sleeves as the hem fell to the tops of her thighs, covering everything but her legs.

She glanced up to find a fire raging in Gideon's eyes.

He was shielding her from them.

Or, more likely, shielding the proof of her witchy-ness: the blood dripping down her calf, the spellmark on her ankle, the signature floating behind her.

If the change in her appearance surprised him, he didn't show it.

"Can we hurry this up?" Gideon's voice held a warning as he turned back to the officers. He stepped toward the door, forcing them into the hall. "My wife and I were just married and would like to be alone."

"Of course," said the officer. "We, um, were wondering if you've seen this girl?"

There was a short pause, then: "No."

"And your wife? Mrs. Sharpe, have you seen this girl?"

Gideon stepped aside, but only barely, allowing Rune to answer. In the doorway, one officer held out a locket. It hung from a golden chain and was instantly familiar.

Rune had gifted it to Soren two weeks ago. It was an exact twin of a locket he'd given her.

And *her* face was painted inside.

"I've never seen that girl in my life," said Rune, glad she'd had the chance to illusion herself.

"There. Are we good?" Gideon's rough voice made his role of impatient new husband all too convincing. Before they answered, he said, "Great. Goodbye."

He slammed the door in their faces.

The room seemed to have shrunk since they first entered it. Still facing the door, Gideon heaved a sigh. Rune stared at his bare back, unable to stop her eyes from tracing the corded muscles in his shoulders and arms.

"Thank you," she whispered.

“Under any other circumstances”—he turned to look at her, his gaze dropping to his massive shirt hanging off her small frame—“I would have thrown him out.”

Unable to find her voice, Rune simply nodded.

The foot of space between them felt like a sliver as they stood half-dressed in front of each other.

She tried to hold his gaze and failed, her eyes dropping to take him in. She heard the breath he let loose, as if they’d unknowingly been playing a game called *Who can hold off the longest?* and now that Rune had lost, Gideon could let himself lose, too. His eyes trailed down her form as he allowed himself to look at her the way she was looking at him.

The air felt strained. Rune was afraid to move, suddenly all too aware of the bed behind her.

“Are you—”

“I should—”

Their voices cut the tension.

Gideon stepped away. Toward the luggage. Turning to Soren's suitcase, he unzipped it, reached inside, and pulled out the first thing he found: a gray knit sweater. Pulling it on, he said, "I'll go see if they have any other available cabins."

He stepped out into the hall.

The door swung shut behind him.

Rune sank onto the bed, her breath rushing out of her. There would be no other cabins. They'd already been reluctant to give her this one, which was normally reserved for staff. She could have told Gideon this, but in truth, she wanted him gone so she could get her thundering heart under control.

Two nights, she told herself. It's only two nights.

Two nights in bed with Gideon Sharpe.

Rune squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to think of all the ways this could go horribly, disastrously wrong.